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# THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ENGLISH AND EMPLOYABILITY

IN THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

Dr Elizabeth J Erling

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# FOREWORD

Youth employability is one of the major challenges across the Middle East and North Africa. This year, unemployment levels have reached 27 per cent in the Middle East and 29 per cent in North Africa, twice the global average. This shortage of opportunity for young people has a high economic cost; equally it has a profound impact on the young people themselves and the cultural and social fabric of communities and wider societies.

Governments across the region are investing heavily in their young people's education and have recognised the importance of quality education and giving young people the skills they need to succeed. However, overall attainment levels in a number of countries in the region remain low compared to standard international benchmarks such as TIMMS and PISA and there is still some way to go. We hear that employers across the region report a shortage of graduates with the soft skills, work skills and behaviours they need.

In January 2015, our first symposium on employability, skills and opportunities for young people in MENA, launched in collaboration with the League of Arab States, initiated a broader discussion on many of the issues above. At the time, we knew that demand for English was rising rapidly in the region but not enough about the impact this trend was having on employability.

Now, our own research confirms what many of us might have thought – that learning any foreign language well improves young peoples' employability. In other words it is multilingualism that really allows societies to prosper.

Our second research finding is that many public English language support programmes in MENA are not achieving the desired improvement in English language attainment levels.

The research shows that this is because many of the initiatives are dealing with individual parts of the system, the teacher or the curriculum, and not the whole. Systemic change can only be achieved through a holistic approach which focuses on the core skills that young people in MENA need, including foreign language skills.

At the British Council, we've been sharing the UK's language and culture in MENA for nearly 80 years. In recent years, alongside the highest quality English language teaching we have increasingly been offering soft and core skills programmes. We remain committed to working with our partners across the region to support improved teaching and learning of English and core skills.

Together, we can take an important step towards improving education and lifelong learning in the region. I would like to thank Dr Elizabeth Erling of the Open University in the UK for this research. Our hope is that governments, policymakers and indeed teachers themselves will all take the conclusions of this research, share them widely and continue to push for a more comprehensive approach to education reform.

**Adrian Chadwick OBE**  
*Regional Director,  
Middle East and North Africa  
British Council*

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report explores what is known about the relationship between English language learning and employability in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA).

**Section 1** summarises the economic situation in MENA and describes some of the approaches to reform that have been proposed to generate economic growth, which include labour market reform (a focus on demand), and investment in education and changes in education systems (a focus on supply). It concludes with a collated list of recommendations for reforming MENA economies.

**Section 2** provides an overview of education systems in MENA and educational policy attempts to respond to economic and social needs in the region. Included in these reforms are proposals to enhance both access to and quality of education; making education more responsive to the needs of the private sector; and expanding and improving English language teaching. This section also presents an overview of the data that exists on the relationship between economic development and education that is relevant to the region. It demonstrates that overall investments in education, though significant in many countries across the region (and particularly in the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC) countries), have not resulted in the expected outcomes (i.e. significant improvements in the provision of education).

**Section 3** looks at the role and status of English in society and in education systems across MENA, and considers the role of the language in promoting employability. The section first reviews the evidence that relates English language learning to economic gain for nations and individuals, paying heed also to the results that have been found elsewhere. It suggests that there is a relationship between English language skills and economic gain, but the benefits at a national level are limited by the wider system and factors such as macro-economic stability, good governance and transparency. Similarly, a person's social environment and individual circumstances limit the returns of English at an individual level. So without targeting the long-embedded inequalities in terms of gender, ethnicity and the urban-rural divide, education in general – and English language education in particular – is not likely to provide disadvantaged individuals with the resources that they need to catch up.

There is little quantitative evidence from the MENA region that would allow us to make claims such as “an individual who speaks English earns Xper cent more than an individual that doesn’t” – and this might be the type of evidence that parents and policy makers would most like to see.

But even when such claims are made, they are restricted to certain employment sectors and geographic regions and cannot be generalised to whole populations or regions.

Evidence also shows that while English language skills are related to economic opportunities, the same can be said of any language skills. Multilingualism is very valuable for societies, and it is certainly not the case, as was once thought by some, that multilingualism acts as a barrier to economic development. This provides good justification for ensuring that local and national languages maintain a strong role in societies, and that children are offered opportunities to develop a strong foundation of literacy and communication skills in local languages, which will then, in turn, ensure a strong basis for second language learning.

**Section 3** ends with a review of the emerging research into English language teaching programmes and programmes in higher education that are using English as a medium of instruction (EMI). These studies highlight the serious challenges involved in implementing effective English language teaching initiatives in the region. They also uncover clear needs to develop teachers' competences in student-centred, communicative teaching approaches, as well as abilities to deliver sector-specific, authentic ESP programmes.

Research into EMI raises severe concerns about the efficacy of such programmes in MENA and the opportunities for students to access learning through English. Moreover, the research uncovers concerns among some MENA populations (overall but particularly in the GCC countries) of dominance of global culture over local values, as well as efforts to maintain local values, cultures, religion and languages.

This research therefore implies that offering quality English language teaching is a challenge in the region. Offering education through English as the only medium seems likely to act as a further hindrance to learning. Despite the significant investment of governments and individuals, even in some of the most generously funded education systems in the world, these challenges persist.

This suggests that there are wider issues at stake, and that there is a need for significant transformation in education systems and traditions. Access to high quality English language teaching should be equitable, and should offer individuals opportunities to enhance their capabilities in ways that allow them to capitalise on economic and social opportunities and to take ownership of English as a medium for the expression of local values. At the moment there is little evidence that this is happening.



The report concludes by summarising the implications of this review and by proposing recommendations for policy makers and implementers that would help support the transformation of education systems in MENA so that education and language learning can better contribute to human development. These recommendations relate to both wider education systems in general, as the context in which language learning and skills development sits, and English language teaching in particular.

The recommendations include:

#### **Approaches concerning language use and language learning**

- Applying a bilingual/multilingual approach to education at all levels and in all countries to support improvements in quality
- Building more bridges to allow students to move between their local languages and varieties, the national language and international languages
- Ensuring strong foundations in local language(s) literacies as well as English literacy, with bridges connecting the two
- Ensuring that appropriate language learning pedagogies are used with young learners so that they gain confidence and useful communication skills
- Promoting high quality English language teaching through appropriate teacher education or professional development initiatives and shifts in assessment policies

#### **Curriculum reforms**

- Implementing in policy and practice learner-centred pedagogies that move away from rote learning and memorisation
- Integrating critical thinking, problem solving and autonomy skills into the subject curriculum
- Updating the curriculum to be relevant to the real needs of society

#### **Teacher education**

- Strengthening systems for initial teacher education and opportunities for the professional development of practising teachers over time and at scale
- Harnessing ICTs for the provision of teacher education
- Providing support for teachers to enact multilingual strategies in the classroom to support students in learning to communicate in local, national and international languages

#### **Educational system reforms**

- Implementing national quality assurance standards
- Reforming assessment systems so that they ensure that certain knowledge and competencies are learned instead of working as gatekeepers
- Maintaining focus on improving quality of basic education so that it is relevant to people's lives and potential for employment

- Embedding more flexibility into education systems
- Focusing on equity issues (particularly those related to location, gender and language background)
- Ensuring that education is delivered in a medium that students can access

### Technical education

- Ensuring that skills development initiatives are relevant and accessible to those who need them most (reducing barriers to vocational education)
- Embedding literacy and numeracy development and language learning within Technical and Vocational Educational Training (TVET)
- Improving the image of TVET (through enhancing employability)

### Further research, monitoring and evaluation

- Filling the data gap with regards to learning outcomes in the region in general and in terms of English levels among teachers and students
- Developing independent education research institutions

- Promoting monitoring and evaluation, for sharing good practice across the region, and for scaling up successful initiatives
- Providing more quantitative data about levels of English in society and needs for English (and other languages) in the labour market, including the informal sector
- Providing more qualitative data – through case studies – about what people can actually do with English language skills once obtained, what challenges can be solved and opportunities sought with additional competences in English

This report suggests that such education initiatives (including those in English language teaching ELT) are embedded within wider programmes for development that take into account the larger structural issues in order to enhance people's opportunities and capabilities.

# LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<b>DFID</b>	Department for International Development (UK)	<b>NA</b>	North Africa
<b>ELT</b>	English language teaching	<b>NGO</b>	Non-Government Organisations
<b>EMI</b>	English-medium instruction	<b>OECD</b>	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
<b>ESP</b>	English for Specific Purposes	<b>OPT</b>	Occupied Palestinian Territory
<b>EU</b>	European Union	<b>SDGs</b>	Sustainable Development Goals
<b>FDI</b>	Foreign Direct Investment	<b>SME</b>	Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises
<b>GCC</b>	Gulf Co-operation Council	<b>TVET</b>	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
<b>GDP</b>	Gross Domestic Product	<b>UAE</b>	United Arab Emirates
<b>GMR</b>	Gulf Marketing Review	<b>UK</b>	United Kingdom
<b>HDI</b>	Human Development Index	<b>WB</b>	World Bank
<b>ICT</b>	Information Communication Technologies		
<b>ILO</b>	International Labour Organisation		
<b>KEI</b>	Knowledge Economy Index		
<b>LICs</b>	Lower Income Countries		
<b>MDGs</b>	Millennium Development Goals		
<b>ME</b>	Middle East		
<b>MENA</b>	Middle East and North Africa		

# INTRODUCTION

Across the globe, national economies are struggling with high levels of unemployment, with the Middle East and North Africa region (MENA) having the highest level of unemployment in the world (ILO, 2014: 63). In MENA, reducing unemployment is particularly challenged by the fact that there is a large youth population (nearly half of the population of MENA is under the age of 20), and youth unemployment has reached a historical peak: 29.5 per cent among 15-24 year olds in 2014, more than twice the global average (ILO, 2014: 21; ILO WESO, 2015). Of great concern are the high levels of unemployment among the educated: graduate unemployment is now over 30 per cent in some countries in the region and as much as 40 per cent for graduate women aged 15-29 (British Council, 2013c).

There is a complex array of factors contributing to high rates of youth and graduate unemployment, which include religious commitment, kinship allegiances, family responsibilities, low levels of participation at all levels and an absence of a sense of motivation or belonging (Population Council, 2010; Zaalouk, 2014). Some graduates are not willing to take the jobs that are available if they do not conform to their high expectations, and they prefer to wait for more secure and high-paying jobs in the public sector.

Frustration with this situation contributed to the social unrest of the 'Arab Spring' in 2011, along with deep-seated frustrations with corruption, state legitimacy and foreign policies (Adams and Winthrop, 2011). While the revolutions resulted in regime change in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya, the region as a whole is still struggling to address historical problems and offer political stability and opportunities for economic growth. Economic uncertainty has remained high, and political crises in Yemen, Syria and Libya have escalated, which have had a negative impact on hiring and investment (ILO, 2012).

Moreover, although oil prices have recently risen and the economies in GCC countries have improved (Arabian business.com, 2015), they have not returned to their pre-2010 highs, and this has contributed to slower growth rates (Zaalouk, 2014). Since the beginning of the 21st century, unemployment has been a persistent issue across MENA and, despite the fact that there was a short phase of improvement before the economic downturn, long-term solutions have not yet been found (Assaad, 2014).

Given this context, much effort has been put into, first of all, understanding the complex myriad of reasons behind the high levels of unemployment in MENA and, secondly, exploring ways of transforming the economic environment.

The challenge of offering people, particularly the youth, pathways to employability has been a priority of the Education for All (EFA) movement, with Goal 3 focusing on:

*Ensuring that the learning needs of all young people and adults are met through equitable access to appropriate learning and life-skills programmes.*

(UNESCO, 2000)

In the post-2015 era, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) recognise that quality growth and jobs should be central to a new development framework beyond 2015. Goal 8 proposes to “promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all” (UN, 2014). This goal is further strengthened by specific targets on social protection and skills development under other proposed goals.

Ways of developing the economy and enhancing the employability of MENA's youth have also been the subject of many global monitoring reports (e.g. UNESCO, 2010; IFC, 2011; ILO, 2012; MEYI, 2009; Steer et al., 2014; World Bank, 2014) as well as the focus of the Symposium on Employability, Skills and Opportunities for Young People in the Arab World, hosted by the British Council and the League of Arab States in Cairo in 2015 (see British Council, 2015).

Discussions in these reports feature two main positions on how to promote employment in MENA. The first focuses on the lack of demand for skilled workers because of low economic growth, the dominant role of the government as an employer, and the relatively high cost of doing business in the region (World Bank, 2007: 20). Creating demand requires a systemic overhaul of the economic system, which would involve the diversification of the economy. The second position – which is sometimes challenged by those promoting the first – focuses on the existing supply of employees, which, even when jobs are created in MENA, is said not to possess the appropriate skills to undertake these jobs. This lack of appropriate skill is attributed to constrained access to education in general, and a high likelihood of experiencing poor quality education in particular. Education systems are accused of not providing the people who pass through them with the skills that a globalised knowledge-based economy demands. These skills include:

- Sophisticated literacy and numeracy skills
- Problem-solving skills
- Reflection
- Emotional intelligence
- Critical/independent thinking
- Communication skills

Language skills (in Arabic, English and French, as appropriate to the work environment) are often reported as being highly valued by employers (IFC, 2011: 37). English, in particular, is seen as being necessary for success in the workplace (at least in the formal private sector). Skills in English are seen to significantly enhance a person's employability.

### What is the relationship between English and employability?

In focusing on the need to improve the supply of the workforce in MENA, it is often suggested that the development of education in general, and English language education in particular, have a significant role to play in improving jobseekers' chances on the labour market. Because of the strong discourses that adhere to English as a language of economic development (cf. Seargeant and Erling, 2011), many countries across the world have been moving quickly to try to secure the advantage that English proficiency is alleged to provide.

These moves, however, are often being made "without having explored the matter of what evidence exists to support the claim, what costs will be required to sustain such an effort" (Baldauf et al., 2010: 432).

The language economist François Grin (2013) argues that societal views on complex social, political and economic questions are often constrained by inadequately informed perceptions. It is therefore important to look at the evidence that exists that can help to understand the relationship between English language skills and the development of an economy or enhancing employability in order to inform policy and practice.

To date, there is remarkably little research into this field in terms of large-scale empirical studies in MENA (as opposed to the growing body of work in this field in South Asia; see Erling, 2014). There is, however, some evidence available that can allow us to gain insight into the relationship between English and employability. Here are two examples:

- There is a strong tradition of economic research that has established a relationship between investment in education and the economic development of nations, as well the earning power for individuals (Hawkes and Ugur, 2012). It has been found, however, that this relationship is influenced by the larger systems in which education functions, and does not always hold true in all contexts. One of the contexts for which this relationship seems not to hold true includes MENA. A report released by the World Bank in 2007 entitled *The Road not Travelled* identified that in many MENA countries, returns on investments in education are low, and unemployment rates are the highest among individuals with higher levels of education (cf. British Council, 2013c). This means that, while investment in education is required to extend access and enhance quality, investments in education – not even significant ones – do not necessarily result in these outcomes. It is therefore important to consider why they don't.

- There is a small, but growing, body of research that explores the specific role of English language learning in economic gain for nations and individuals (see Erling and Seargeant, 2013). Euromonitor research (2012), for example, represents an attempt to investigate the extent to which promotion of English is an important factor in achieving economic growth in several MENA countries. This report demonstrates that English is valued among recruiters and large, multi-national firms in the formal private sector, which employ a small but important percentage of the population (i.e. the elite). However, little is known about the value of and role for English in employment opportunities for average citizens across MENA, many of whom work in the informal sector. The number of people working in this sector varies across the region, but some MENA countries (particularly those outside the GCC) are among the most informal economies in the world (Angel-Urdinola and Tanabe, 2012: 2).

The purpose of this report is to collate the evidence that exists to help answer the question of what role English language skills might have in the promotion of economic development and employability in the MENA region.

There are three sections in this report, which analyse various aspects of this issue: the economic situation, the education system as a whole and the context of English language.

- **Section 1** summarises the economic situation in MENA and describes some of the approaches to reform that have been proposed to generate economic growth, which include labour market reform (a focus on demand) and investment in education and changes in education systems (a focus on supply).
- **Section 2** provides an overview of education systems in MENA and educational policy attempts to respond to economic and social needs in the region. Included in these reforms are proposals to enhance both access to and quality of education; making education more responsive to the needs of the private sector; and expanding and improving English language teaching. This section also presents an overview of the data that exists on the relationship between economic development and education that is relevant to the region, and shows that overall investments in education, though significant in many countries (and particularly in the GCC), have not resulted in the expected outcomes (i.e. significant improvements in the provision of education).
- **Section 3** looks at the role and status of English in society and in education systems across MENA. It also reviews the evidence that exists about the relationship between English language learning and economic development. It reviews recent research into English language teaching (ELT) initiatives in the region as well as attempts to implement English-medium instruction (EMI), in order to draw conclusions about the potential role of English in economic growth and employability.

The report concludes by summarising the implications of this review and by proposing recommendations for policy makers and for further research.

## Positioning and methodology for this study

### What is meant by 'employability'

In order to explore the role of the English language in employability in MENA, it is important to establish what precisely is meant by 'employability'. The ILO defines employability skills as:

*The skills, knowledge and competencies that enhance a worker's ability to secure and retain a job, progress at work and cope with change, secure another job if he/she so wishes or has been laid off and enter more easily into the labour market at different periods of the lifecycle.* (in Brewer, 2013: 6)

The skill sets needed for work are commonly classified as basic/foundation skills, technical or vocational skills, professional/personal skills and core work skills (see Table 1).

While this skills list addresses the fact that there is a need for communicative abilities in gaining employment (e.g. literacy, listening and communicating effectively), it does not refer to needs for specific languages.

The same ILO report from 2013, however, mentions the need for language skills as part of the core skills of employability:

*The skills, knowledge and competencies that enhance a worker's ability to secure and retain a job, progress at work and cope with change, secure another job if he/she so wishes or has been laid off and enter more easily into the labour market at different periods of the lifecycle. Individuals are most employable when they have broad-based education and training, basic and portable high-level skills, including teamwork, problem solving, information and communications technology (ICT) and communication and language skills. This combination of skills enables them to adapt to changes in the world of work.* (Brewer, 2013: 6)

Although not exemplified here, it is assumed that these language skills might include knowledge of the standard variety of the national language, local and regional languages, and dialects and foreign/international languages such as English and French.

Skills for the world of work	
Basic/foundation	At their most elemental, foundation skills include the literacy and numeracy skills necessary for getting work that can pay enough to meet daily needs. These skills are also a prerequisite for continuing in education and training and for acquiring transferable and technical and vocational skills that enhance the prospect of getting good jobs.
Technical or vocational	Specialised skills, knowledge or know-how needed to perform specific duties or tasks
Professional/personal	Individual attributes that impact on work habits such as honesty, integrity, work ethic
Core work skills	The ability to learn and adapt; read and write and compute competently; listen and communicate effectively; think creatively; solve problems independently; manage oneself at work; interact with co-workers; work in teams or groups; handle basic technology; lead effectively as well as follow supervision

Table 1: Skills for the world of work (Brewer, 2013: 6; see also UNESCO, 2012)



In MENA, concerns for employability often relate to the formal private sector, the public sector and the informal sector. The **private sector** encompasses all for-profit businesses that are not owned or operated by the government. It is the part of the economy that is not under state control, but is run by individuals and companies for profit. In many developed, free-market economies, the private sector is where the majority of jobs are held; however, historically across MENA, the public sector has been a major employer of the working population. The **public sector** is the part of the economy under control of the government, and is generally concerned with providing various government services.

In MENA, the informal sector also plays a significant role in many countries' economies. It comprises non-agricultural employment that is neither taxed nor monitored by any form of government. Although hard to generalise, the lack of regulation often means poor employment conditions, low wages, compulsory overtime and perhaps even unsafe working conditions. Such jobs normally do not provide any social benefits such as pensions, sick pay and health insurance. Integrating the informal sector into the formal sector is an important policy challenge, and the development of skills of employers and employees is essential to this.

While it is useful to gain insight into the kind of skills that future employees are likely to need in their roles in any of these sectors, the focus on skills in the definitions of employability has been criticised for over-emphasising the responsibility of the individual in acquiring skills and gaining employment (Valiente, 2014). This is why in this report I have attempted to position employability as intimately connected with labour market strategies, development strategies and education policies. These are factors that often lie beyond individuals' control, and no attempts to gain skills or competences for employment can influence them.

Finally, it is worth noting that, in focusing on employability skills, there is a risk of prioritising them as the singular and sole purpose of education, when research has shown that the needs and aspirations of the youth extend far beyond them (Powell and McGrath, 2014). The same can be said of English language learning; in focusing on the role of English in economic gain and employability, there is a risk of overlooking other outcomes of language learning, which include enhanced intercultural understanding and cognitive benefits. Therefore the position taken in this report is that economic and education policies, including those for language education, should focus on human development, the creation of decent work and the promotion of learning for livelihoods and civic engagement, rather than simply the generation of skills or income.

## Methods

As well as clarifying the position taken in this report towards the concept of ‘employability’, it is important to note the ways in which information about this topic has been acquired. The methods used to undertake this study on the role of English in employability in MENA include the following:

1. *Interviews:* In order to gain a better sense of the skills development agendas, the status of English and other languages, and major projects promoting English language learning in these countries, telephone interviews were conducted from November 2014 to March 2015 with British Council representatives from a number of MENA countries covered in this report.<sup>1</sup> These interviews informed the position of this report and were useful in uncovering relevant literature, both internal and otherwise.
2. *Presence at Cairo Symposium:* From 27 to 28 January 2015, I attended the British Council Cairo Symposium on Employability, Skills and Opportunities for Young People in the Arab World. This event gave me the valuable opportunity to meet scholars, practitioners and industry representatives from across MENA, to hear first-hand about the challenges of employment and some solutions being sought, to share emerging ideas from this research and to gain a better sense of the context and situation.
3. *Internet search:* Interviews and personal meetings were followed up by a systematic internet search for policy documents, scoping reports and evaluations of the policies and projects that had been discussed.
4. *Database search:* In order to find the most recent and reliable evidence about the relationship between English language learning, economic growth and employability, a systematic search of social science databases was conducted.<sup>2</sup> The search focused on published empirical research (even including some with a focus beyond MENA, as some findings might be generalisable). However, as there seems to be a lack of publications of this sort about education in MENA, and very little in the field of English language teaching, any published empirical study with even marginal relevance to this work was considered.
5. *Peer review:* This report has also been subject to rigorous review by educational experts and policy implementers at the British Council, the Open University and elsewhere (see Acknowledgements).

<sup>1</sup> The interview schedule consisted of eight questions, which explored recent and relevant information and policy documents on the country’s educational goals regarding employability and skills development, as well as the challenges to implementing these policies (see Appendix A). They focused in particular on any specific policies and programmes that aim to promote English language learning as part of enhancing skills development in the school, TVET and higher education sectors. In most cases, these questions were simply used to direct less structured, informal telephone conversations. In others, the questions were responded to via email.

<sup>2</sup> The search terms used to find sources included employability, economic development, returns to education, skills, TVET, technical education and English. While not limited to this, the focus of the search was on recent studies published about MENA (from 2006–2015), but particularly those post-Arab Spring, which shed light on the current situation.

## SECTION 1:

### Context and situation: the challenge of promoting economic growth in MENA

In order to understand the complex array of factors that contribute to high unemployment in MENA, as well as consider appropriate and feasible solutions within education systems and beyond, it is important to understand the context and historical, political situation in the region. An overview of this is provided below.

#### 1.1 Defining the region

As a first step, it is necessary to define the region that is covered in this report. Broadly following the conventions of the International Labour Organisation (ILO), I will use the term MENA (Middle East and North Africa) to refer to the 17 countries<sup>3</sup> making up the following three sub-regions:

- The Middle East (ME): Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT), Syria and Yemen
- North Africa (NA): Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Morocco and Tunisia
- The states of the Gulf Co-operation Council (GCC): Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)

Although MENA is discussed here as a collective, it is important to note that there are great differences and disparities between and within its sub-regions, which also differ widely in terms of population, per-capita income and development. MENA is made up of eight lower-middle-income countries, six middle-income countries and six high-income countries (Steer et al., 2014: 3).

Table 2 provides recent statistics about the population, Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and Human Development Index (HDI) ranking in each country in the region, and provides recent percentages of unemployed and youth unemployed in the population<sup>4</sup>.

In some of these countries, agriculture is an important part of the economy, while, for example, those in the GCC are desert-based and have very little agriculture. Some countries could be defined as 'resource rich' and labour importing (e.g. those in the GCC that have a wealth of natural resources), while others are 'resource poor' and labour exporting (e.g. Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon). Lack of agriculture and concerns about diminishing natural resources have resulted in increasing efforts to develop the service sector and the knowledge economy across MENA.

Due to these economic differences, as well as political strife, there has been much inter-regional migration across MENA. For example, many workers from the Middle East (ME) have found temporary employment in the GCC countries, and numbers have increased post-Arab Spring. Large numbers of Egyptians, for example, have also sought employment in Jordan where jobs have been more abundant. There are large numbers of Lebanese, among others, who have emigrated to the GCC countries to take on positions that nationals could not, or did not want to, take on; as well as Syrians seeking employment (and more recently refuge) in neighbouring Lebanon.

<sup>3</sup> Comoros, Djibouti, Mauritania, Somalia and Sudan are sometimes considered to be part of the MENA region, but not by the ILO or the British Council. They are therefore not included in this report.

<sup>4</sup> According to the ILO, unemployed people are "those who are currently not working but are willing and able to work for pay, currently available to work, and have actively searched for work".

In many countries, there are pockets of fragility, conflict and instability – some more significant than others – which continue to threaten and undermine the region's economic growth and human development.

Despite the many differences between the regions and countries, there are similarities and overriding concerns with the economic, social and education systems in each of the countries and sub-regions. Assaad (2013: i) describes these shared characteristics as an oversized public sector, high unemployment for educated youth, a weak private sector dependent on governments for survival,

rapid growth in educational attainment, but much of it focused on the pursuit of formal credentials rather than productive skills, and low and stagnant female labour force participation rates. These commonalities mean that it is still sensible and feasible to discuss the region as a collective. Where there are exceptions and cases which go against the trend, I have attempted to call attention to them in this report. In a further attempt to capture the diversity of the region, I have included throughout the report vignettes about issues that are particularly relevant in specific national contexts.

Country	Population (in millions, 2013)	GDP (in billions, USD)	HDI Ranking (2013) <sup>5</sup>	Unemployment (per cent pop., 2012)	Youth <sup>6</sup> unemployment (per cent pop., 2012)
Algeria	39.21	210.20 (2013)	0.713	12.8	21.6
Bahrain	1.33	32.89 (2013)	0.82	7.4	27.5
Egypt	82.06	271.97 (2013)	0.68	11.9	35.7
Iraq	33.42	229.33 (2013)	0.64	15.1	32.1
Jordan	6.46	33.68 (2013)	0.75	11.2	31.3
Kuwait	3.37	175.83 (2013)	0.81	1.5	9.2
Lebanon	4.47	44.35 (2013)	0.77	8.9	22.8
Libya	6.20	74.20 (2013)	0.78	8.9	23.9
Morocco	32.88	112.60 (2014)	0.591	9.7 <sup>7</sup>	17.4
Oman	3.63	79.66 (2013)	0.78	8.1	20.6
Palestine	4.40	11.26 (2012)	0.69	23.0	34.6
Qatar	2.17	203.24 (2013)	0.85	0.6	1.7
Saudi Arabia	28.83	748.45 (2013)	0.84	5.6	27.8
Syria	22.85	40.41 (2007)	0.66	8.3	19.3
Tunisia	10.89	47.13 (2013)	0.721	15.2	29.3
UAE	9.35	402.34 (2013)	0.83	3.8	11.0
Yemen	24.41	35.95 (2013)	0.50	17.6	34.8

Table 2: Economic statistics in MENA countries<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The Human Development Index (HDI) was created and is used by the United Nations Development Programme. It is a comparative measure of life expectancy, literacy, education, standards of living and quality of life for countries worldwide. It is a standard means of measuring wellbeing, especially child welfare. It is used to distinguish whether the country is a developed, a developing or an underdeveloped country, and also to measure the impact of economic policies on quality of life. The highest ranked country globally is Norway, at 0.994.

<sup>6</sup> Youth defined as aged 15–24

<sup>7</sup> 2015 <sup>8</sup> The statistics in this table were collated from [www.theglobaleconomy.com](http://www.theglobaleconomy.com)

## 1.2 Labour market issues in MENA

There has been much enquiry into the reasons behind the low economic growth and resulting high levels of unemployment, and youth and graduate unemployment, in MENA (e.g. UNESCO 2010; IFC, 2011; ILO, 2012; Assaad, 2013; Steer et al., 2014; World Bank, 2014). These reports point to a complex array of factors, including the global financial crisis and the challenges posed by increasingly knowledge-based economies (UNESCO, 2012). While these issues might be generic to all economies, the MENA region is further challenged by the dominant role of the public sector, the lack of development of the private sector, the growth of the informal sector, migration, large-scale inequality and social exclusion, and political and social crises in the region, with the Arab Spring having a toll on many countries' economies.

### 1.2.1 The dominant role of the public sector

One of the most significant factors hindering economic growth and diversification in MENA is the dominant role of the public sector. Historically, the public sector has been the main (and most coveted) employer for graduates. In the 1990s, the percentage of the population employed in the public sector in MENA was higher than anywhere else in the world; at that time governments employed on average around 20 per cent of all workers (World Bank, 2007: 52). There are several advantages to working in the public sector, including higher wages, greater job security and more generous benefits. This is why many graduates

prefer to wait for a government job for as long as ten years rather than accept another job in the private sector. The public sector has generally accepted graduates of disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, whose degrees have tended not to prepare them for work in the private sector. But now that the public sector is shrinking in most MENA countries, such graduates are left unemployed.

While the dominance of the public sector is a more severe issue in MENA, where there are much higher levels of unemployment, the wealthy, oil-exporting countries in the GCC also tend to be largely state driven, which causes problems in the local economy and education systems. These governments guarantee nationals an income floor, including state-provided health services and other family benefits. Assaad (2013: 2) argues that this is used as a tool to appease politically salient groups as part an "authoritarian bargain", i.e. an implicit deal between the state and politically significant groups to provide them with well-compensated jobs, in exchange for political quiescence, and will hence continue to undermine the development of the labour market. The strength of the public sector also can result in nationals neither being motivated to take jobs outside the protected environment of the public sector, nor necessarily having skills that are desirable in the private sector, which also limits individuals' abilities to develop sustainable business sectors (ILO, 2014: 62–63).

### Unemployment in Qatar

Qatar is the only country in MENA that has managed to escape the issue of unemployment. The country's economic success is closely linked to its oil and gas industry, which accounts for 70 per cent of government revenue, 50 per cent of GDP and 85 per cent of export earnings. At 0.5 per cent, Qatar has the lowest unemployment in the world and no records of any percentage of the population living under the poverty line (CIA World Factbook, 2015). Many people do not pursue a higher education because they can obtain government jobs without a degree (Al-Misnad, 2012). This, however, does not mean that Qatari workers would be employable on the international scale, or that the education system is not in need of reform. In fact, the government is making major investments into education, as it recognises the need for a highly educated populace to sustain a prosperous society in the face of diminishing natural resources (Qatar's 2030 National Vision, General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2008).

#### 1.2.2 The lack of development of the private sector

The dominant role of the public sector has resulted in the slow development of the private sector in MENA, which needs significant development, in a range of higher-skill, dynamic industries, to create enough jobs for the large educated youth population.

MENA economies – particularly the GCC – countries have primarily been based around natural resources. Recognising, however, that these resources are finite and that the dominance of the energy sectors have prevented others from developing, these countries have recently sought to develop other sectors, though growth has been slow. One reason for slow growth in MENA is that many countries do not specialise in sectors that are employment intensive (e.g. manufacturing and agriculture), but rather sectors that are capital intensive (e.g. construction and telecommunications) (ILO, 2012; ILO, 2014). High wages are paid in the sectors that prosper, which raises labour costs and wage expectations and inhibits job creation in other sectors that might provide more jobs (e.g. industry or services). Moreover, even when the capital-intensive sectors attract Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), one of the major contributors to economic growth and employment creation, the sectors do not have high resource needs and therefore do not provide employment for large numbers of people. The construction sector in the GCC countries also attracts FDI, but as it primarily employs migrant workers at lower wages, it has limited benefit for the economy at large (ILO, 2014: 67). A further issue restricting growth is that the private sector does not provide a transparent business and investment climate (ILO, 2012: 18).

### The Economic Vision 2030 for Bahrain

The following example from Bahraini economic policy well exemplifies the issues facing the region: Nationally, our economy needs transformation. Bahrain is facing a shortage of both quality employment and appropriate skills ... Bahrainis are not the preferred choice for employers in the private sector, since the education system does not yet provide young people with the skills and knowledge needed to succeed in our labour market. For many years, Bahrain has been able to address these issues by redistributing oil revenues and offering citizens jobs in the public sector. *This has left us with an oversized public sector – a situation that will be unsustainable in the future, considering the gradual decline of oil reserves. The most sustainable way of resolving the imbalance and raising the quality of employment is a transformation to an economy driven by a thriving private sector – where productive enterprises, engaged in high-value-added activities, offer attractive career opportunities to suitably skilled Bahrainis.* (Bahrain Economic Development Board, 2008)

#### 1.2.3 The growth of the informal sector

The difficulty of gaining employment in the public sector and the lack of development of the private sector has led to an increase in graduates entering into the informal sector. Many young people in MENA seeking employment cannot afford to search for jobs for a long period of time or prefer not to wait for appropriate positions to arise (this is particularly the case for the unemployed outside of the GCC countries).

This often forces them to take jobs in the informal sector. For a minority, such jobs may be a stepping stone to more stable and fulfilling employment. But for most, they are a trap that is difficult to escape, as they do not lead to secure or stable employment of the type desired by the educated youth, and offer wages below the poverty line (UNESCO, 2012: 197; ILO, 2015). Jobs in the informal sector tend not to offer training opportunities that allow people to improve performance at work or to learn other skills (Fluitman, 2009: 10), though this would be necessary for integrating the informal sector into the formal private sector.

#### 1.2.4 Migration

Migration plays a significant role in the economies of MENA countries, but has also been credited with contributing to the slow development of the economy. The region has one of the highest emigration rates in the world, which means that there is a significant amount of 'brain drain'. Dutta et al. (2014: 123), for example, note that 15 per cent of those migrating from Morocco are highly skilled (i.e. have a tertiary or graduate degree). Governments of countries that tend to provide migrant workers (e.g. North Africa, Lebanon, Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT)) tend to view emigration favourably as it reduces unemployment and provides remittances in the short term. Since employing migrant workers provides local employers with cheap labour, employers in countries that tend to attract them (e.g. the GCC countries) also view it positively.



The ILO (2012: 38), however, argues that migration is not a long-term solution to employability issues in the region, but is geared to the short-term objectives of certain investors that take little account of the sustainability and fairness of the type of economic growth pursued. Migration also encourages the use of labour-intensive techniques and depresses local wages and therefore removes incentives to modernise processes with new technologies (not to mention that many migrant workers, particularly in the GCC countries, are deprived of basic human rights). When jobs are rare and not particularly lucrative in the private sector, this stalls growth and increases the pressure on the government to provide employment.

#### The role of language skills among migrant workers in the GCC

Research conducted by Erling et al. (2015) in a recent British Council-funded research project and we looked at the role of English among migrant workers from rural Bangladesh working in the GCC countries. Among participants in this study, many of whom had rather low levels of education, language skills were clearly seen as important. However, these people felt that the most important factor in determining their success in working abroad was being skilled in a certain line of work. Participants reported that the people who got the better jobs and earned the most tended to speak English, but there were also examples of people with high levels of skill and language abilities who faced significant hardship and exploitation.

This suggests that higher levels of education and language skills may help migrant workers navigate difficult experiences, but English skills certainly did not ensure success or protect people from adversity.

#### 1.2.5 Political and social crises and conflict

Problems in the labour market in MENA are not new, but the 2008 international financial crisis and the Arab Spring have meant that economic growth has been slow, particularly in the countries outside the GCC. The region has experienced revolutions, political upheavals, conflict, civil war and occupation, and the recent crises in Syria and Libya have intensified the political tensions in the region and slowed economic growth, resulting in migrants from Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon and Tunisia returning to their countries and putting further pressure on the employment situation.

Moreover, refugees attempting to flee civil war in Syria and Yemen are putting pressures on the economies and education systems of neighbouring countries. Four further countries have experienced large-scale political conflicts since the 1960s (Lebanon, Iraq, Kuwait and OPT), and this has surely inhibited growth and the provision of education.



### English and employability in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT)

**With input from Andrew Foster, British Council, OPT. A quarter of the Palestinian population lives in poverty, with the rate in Gaza twice as high as that in the West Bank.**

According to a recent World Bank update (2014), the 2014 conflict in Gaza will put further stress on the already struggling economy. While the average yearly economic growth exceeded 8 per cent between 2007 and 2011, it declined to 1.9 per cent in 2013 and reached minus 1 per cent for the first quarter of 2014. Palestinian businesses have been crippled by the restrictions on movement of people and goods. Unemployment in Gaza is the highest in the world at 43 per cent. At least one out of six Palestinians in the West Bank and nearly every second person in Gaza is unemployed. Youth unemployment soared to more than 60 per cent by the end of 2014 (World Bank, 2015).

What is the role of English in the context where there are severe restrictions on movement and economic opportunity? There would, almost certainly, be more need for English if development, and movement of people and goods, was not severely restricted by the continuing occupation. As it is, English is needed for employment in the coveted jobs in one of the many international organisations active in the country. English is also important for higher education, with many Palestinian faculty members having strong ties with universities abroad.

Part of the large Palestinian diaspora lives in English-speaking countries, particularly the USA, to and from which Palestinians move. English is necessary for applying for scholarships and applications for universities outside the country, and therefore provides a means of 'getting out'. Unfortunately, but perhaps understandably, a large percentage of those who leave never bring back the skills and knowledge that they have acquired. English is also important for accessing information via electronic media, and British Council-commissioned market research conducted in 2014 found that around 70 per cent of Palestinians across the West Bank and Gaza use the internet daily.

Historically, Palestinians have been among the most highly educated populations in the Arab world (Sultan, 2011). Access to education has been good in OPT, outside of sporadic periods of closure and imposed restrictions. Trends of access and quality continue, at least in some schools, as recent research has shown that Palestine refugees are achieving higher-than-average learning outcomes in spite of the adverse circumstances they live under (World Bank, 2014b).

The educational vision for "Palestine 2020" is to create: *A results-based, student-centred and inclusive education system that provides 21st century relevant education services at all levels with high quality and full equity considering individual needs and being at the heart of the political, economic and social development in and for Palestine.* (Ministry of Education and Higher Education, 2014)

The role of English language teaching is central to this vision, evident since the 1998 First Palestinian Curriculum Plan's introduction of English from grade one in schools. The plan stressed the importance of learning languages for participation in modern society and forging international connections (cf. Amara, 2003). Given strong educational traditions and motivations, the achievement of these goals should be possible. However, ongoing issues which impede development and state building, and fragment the education system, mean that seeing this vision become a reality will face severe challenges.

### **1.3 Proposed strategies for promoting employability**

There has been much discussion of the types of solutions that could minimise the problem of unemployment across the region and generate growth in the economy. A number of these proposals focus on the supply side (i.e. the need to ensure that jobseekers have the skills demanded by the economy), and recommend the need to address the skills deficit in society through educational initiatives. Other proposals recognise that educational initiatives on their own cannot generate significant employment opportunities and focus more on the labour demand side (e.g. the development of the economy).

#### **1.3.1 The supply side: addressing the 'skills deficit'**

There is much evidence to suggest that the education systems in MENA are letting their populations down in terms of preparing them for decent employment. Despite progress in response to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), literacy rates in the region are still low, large numbers of primary students do not transition to secondary education and educational outcomes at all levels are well below international averages. As noted in the 11th EFA Global Monitoring Report (2013), 43 per cent of children in the Arab States are not learning basic literacy and numeracy skills, whether they are in school or not. Access to education is a human right, and the provision of quality education has important individual, social and societal benefits (cf. Colclough, 2010). For this reason alone it is imperative that educational systems in the region be improved.

Taking into account the need in MENA for economic diversification, the development of new industries and the promotion of employability, it becomes clear that education systems need to enable job seekers to engage with an increasingly international knowledge economy.

However, when compared with other countries and regions on the Knowledge Economy Index (KEI) – a scale created to measure the degree to which countries successfully engage in the knowledge economy – MENA countries mostly fall beneath the middle range of the distribution (World Bank, 2007: 8). Further evidence of a ‘skills deficit’ comes from reports by Brookings (Steer et al., 2015), the ILO (2015) and McKinsey (Mourshed et al., 2012), which have found that under-education is prevalent among jobseekers in MENA, and more common than over-education, and that the skills of job applicants do not match employer needs:

*Nearly 40 per cent of employers in the formal private sector in the Middle East and North Africa region identify skills shortages as a major constraint to business operation and firm growth (World Bank, 2013). This share is the highest for all developing regions of the world. Inadequate education is also ranked as the fourth most important constraint to economic growth in the Arab World Competitiveness Report 2011-12. (World Economic Forum, 2012) (in Steer, 2015: 16)*

Such findings are substantiated by a survey of 1,500 private sector employers across MENA, which found that, in general, graduates do not have the combination of skills that employers are seeking: Only 20–35 per cent of those surveyed agreed that their university-graduate employees were appropriately skilled upon hiring, and the number of those satisfied with vocational staff hired was even lower (10–25 per cent) (IFC, 2011: 37).

Similarly, in a study conducted by the British Council, 65–80 per cent of the employers interviewed said that graduates were not work ready, and employers find that graduates lack soft skills including the ability to work as part of a team (British Council, 2013c).

Taken together, this research among employers and jobseekers in MENA suggests that there are skills gaps in jobseekers in three key areas:

- Hard skills (lack of adequate understanding of both the theory and application of the discipline)
- Soft skills (ability to communicate clearly, personal creativity, problem-solving skills and interpersonal skills, leadership, work ethic, positive attitude)
- Languages (Arabic, English and French), as appropriate to the work environment

English is seen as particularly important among employers, as can be seen in the following quote:

*It is common for an employer to say, “I’d like to hire more people but they lack adequate technical skills,” or to make reference to the fact that they had a shortage of engineers or people with English language skills, as was the complaint, for example, of a HR manager in a multi-national bank, who told us, “50 per cent of the jobs I cannot fill are due to English language requirements”. (IFC, 2011: 41)*

Taken together, this research has contributed to a dominant discourse of ‘skills deficit’ in MENA: a sense that individuals and the countries at large do not have the skills needed to participate in relevant, wage-earning employment at all levels, national and individual.

As Rogers (2014) points out, what makes this discourse of even greater concern is that there appears to be widespread internalisation of this belief in that jobseekers themselves have low confidence in their abilities and do not value – or even recognise – their own knowledge and experience, which could be better utilised in generating employability and entrepreneurship in MENA.

### 1.3.2 The demand side: addressing labour market needs

Education systems in MENA are certainly in need of attention and reform. However, it is important to bear in mind that there are larger structural, social and economic issues that work as obstacles to creating economic growth in MENA (cf. ILO, 2012; Valiente, 2014; World Bank, 2007; World Bank, 2014a). This is why it is important to also focus on the labour demand side when considering how to make productive use of the increasingly educated youth in MENA. As argued by Black (2004: 10):

*Lack of skills does not cause unemployment or limited employment opportunities ... the problem ... is produced by the constitution of the job market, by economic and social inequality and political powerlessness.*

There is a need for a well-functioning labour market, which then creates a strong demand for adequately trained workers and maximises the returns from investment in education. As the ILO (2012) report argues:

*The low-skill, low-productivity, low-wage economies will not be transformed into high-skill, high-productivity, high-wage economies simply by increasing and improving schools, vocational centres and universities. (ILO, 2012: 20)*

Evidence for the need to reform the labour market can be seen in the high emigration rates in MENA, including to high-income countries that have sophisticated production and requirements for skills (Dutta et al., 2014). The fact that youth from MENA can compete there but not in their own countries implies that there is a lack of work to match their aspirations. The growth of the informal sector across MENA provides further evidence for the lack of formal employment opportunities. An ILO report from 2012 argues that:

*Jobseekers, including youth, have done what is expected of them. Their educational attainment has increased significantly along with their willingness to take up work that is available, even at existing wages. When waged employment is not available, they engage in whatever jobs they can find, including in the informal sector. (ILO, 2012: 22)*

A focus on the demand side shifts the sole responsibility for employability away from individuals and education systems, and emphasises the need for economic policy to focus on decent employment creation and human development more broadly, rather than just fast economic growth.

While there is no definitive answer to how to solve labour market problems in MENA, there have been a number of responses, in policy and practice, which aim to increase the demand for and improve the supply of labour. As the focus of this report is on the supply side (i.e. the role of education in general – and English language education in particular), space does not permit a detailed investigation of proposals to generate demand.

However, a summary of recommendations for reforming MENA economies is listed below, along with references to resources where the ideas are discussed in more detail (see also Angel-Urdinola et al., 2013):

#### Reforming the public sector

- Downsizing and improving accountability (Al-Tamimi, 2014; World Bank, 2010)

#### Developing the private sector

- Building trust so that people want to work in it and increasing stability so that the public sector is not the only viable option (ILO, 2012; ILO, 2014; World Bank, 2007)
- Relaxing labour market rigidities (Haidar, 2011)
- Fostering entrepreneurship (British Council, 2013c; Masri et al., 2010)
- Offering improved employment services, career guidance, job counselling, labour market information (i.e. communicating realities about the job market so that young people and their parents can make informed choices) (British Council, 2013c; Haidar, 2011; Sultana, 2014)
- Providing financial and other support to micro-enterprises and small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) (Fluitman, 2009)

#### Integrating the informal sector into the formal private sector

- Providing opportunities to transform informal employment to SMEs (Fluitman, 2009)

- Developing training opportunities for people working in the informal sector (Fluitman, 2009; Rogers, 2014)
- Promoting apprenticeship opportunities (Rhodes, 2013; Rogers, 2014)
- Providing incentives for employers to offer internships and work placement programmes (Jayaram et al., 2013)
- Issuing wages subsidies (Broecke, 2012)
- Developing systems and models for increasing employer engagement in education (Gamar, 2013)
- Involving students and jobseekers in representation or consultation at national level in educational decision-making. (British Council, 2013c)
- Improving governance and transparency (Valiente, 2014)

Some countries have had some success in transforming their labour markets; for example, in the UAE and Bahrain strong policy directives have enhanced graduate employment prospects (i.e. the demand side) (Schwab, 2014).

However, there are currently limited or no institutional collaborations or multi-stakeholder forums that focus on reforming the labour market across the region, which limits the sharing of knowledge and good practice, and the potential for larger and more significant reforms.

### Insight from the World Economic Forum's Global Competitiveness Report

The 2014–15 Global Competitiveness Report (Schwab, 2014), published by the World Economic Forum, provides insight into the most problematic factors in doing business in MENA countries. Demand-side issues around restrictive labour regulations, corruption, government and policy instability and inefficient bureaucracy featured high on the list for the majority of countries. However, supply-side issues such as an inadequately educated workforce and poor work ethic in the national workforce were also highly significant for Libya, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the UAE.

In terms of successful models, the United Arab Emirates was the highest-ranking country in the region, moving up to 12th position in the last year. As the report notes:

*Overall, the country's competitiveness reflects the high quality of its infrastructure... Going forward, putting the country on a more stable development path will require further investment to boost health and educational outcomes (38th on the health and primary education pillar). Raising the bar with respect to education will require not only measures to improve the quality of teaching and the relevance of curricula, but also measures to provide stronger incentives for the population to attend schools at the primary and secondary levels. Last but not least, further promoting the use of ICTs and a stronger focus on R&D and business innovation will be necessary to diversify the economy and ensure that economic growth is sustainable going into the future. (Schwab, 2014: 36)*

### 1.4 Conclusion: a 'third way'

This section summarised the complex array of factors that play a role in the high levels of unemployment in MENA and described some of the approaches to reform that have been proposed to generate economic growth. A focus on the demand side of the economic situation makes clear a need to create diversified, dynamic and competitive employment sectors that move the economies in the region beyond a reliance on the public sector and on diminishing natural resources. This would create an economy more capable of absorbing a more educated labour force. Also required for this kind of sustainable economic growth is the provision of good governance, transparency and political stability, as well as the need to address large-scale inequality and social exclusion (Valiente, 2014).

A focus on the supply side of the economic situation makes clear a necessity to create ways for people to learn skills that are valued on the labour market, including language skills, as well as a need to align education with the needs of the private sector. The skills deficit is often attributed to the failings of formal education systems. As a result, it is a key concern of educational policies in the region, and attempts are being made to incorporate the development of skills, including foreign languages, into all levels of education.

The education systems across MENA are surely in need of reform. However, given what has been established above about needs for reform in the labour market, it is clear that education reform on its own will not create the necessary stimulus to reduce unemployment. It is neither the supply side nor the demand side on its own that requires transformation, but both together. This is what Zaalouk (2014) has called “a third way” – a sustainable, systematic approach to transforming economic and education systems to support human development, the creation of decent work and the promotion of learning for livelihoods. In order to cultivate leadership, entrepreneurship and innovation and promote democracy and accountability, education systems in MENA must move beyond limited conceptions of employability and skills. Education should build confidence and develop existing knowledge and skills within the society. Young people should be encouraged to question and critically deconstruct the existing economic paradigms and replace them with others that situate the welfare of human beings and societies at the heart of human development (Zaalouk 2014: 356).

The challenges of economic and educational reform in MENA are important to keep in mind when considering the provision of English language teaching in MENA. English already has a strong and embedded role within MENA societies, much of the formal curriculum in most education systems is dedicated to English language learning, motivations are high for learning the language, and young people are regularly using the language to access media and engage with social media.

Despite this, evidence suggests that learning outcomes for formal education are low, and employers are not satisfied with the English language competence that jobseekers come with. It is difficult, therefore, to understand where the problem lies. What are the real demands for English in the types of employment available in MENA? What is the role of English language skills in educational reform, the promotion of employability in the region and the development of a ‘third way’? This will be the focus in Section 3 of this report. Before going onto that, however, it is important to explore the relationship between education and economic development in general – how and why this relationship is measured – and what we know about education systems in MENA in terms of returns on investment so far. This is the focus of Section 2.

## SECTION 2:

### **The role of education in economic growth and employability**

Section 1 established that there is a tremendous challenge to develop the economy and promote employability in populations across the MENA region. It was determined that, rightly or wrongly, education systems are often indirectly given the responsibility of promoting economic growth by preparing youth for the world of work, and then blamed when growth does not occur. This section provides an overview of international research that explores the relationship between education and economic growth and the promotion of employability, focusing on findings relevant to MENA.



## 2.1 The relationship between education and economic gain

There is a significant body of research that has attempted to explore the relationship between investment in education and economic growth (e.g. Hanushek and Woessmann, 2008; Little and Green, 2009). In 2012, the UK's Department for International Development (DfID) sponsored a systematic review of literature exploring this relationship in low-income countries (LICs), where there has been some concern about the efficacy of investment in education. This study confirms common sense assumptions: "largely human capital does have a positive and genuine effect on growth" (Hawkes and Ugur, 2012: 10). Education and skills are found to result in higher productivity, which is conducive to higher output in the economy. The channels through which education and skills may affect economic growth include productivity being improved through enhanced quality and an increase in people who join the labour market. There are also less direct channels through which education affects development, such as the fact that people who are more highly skilled can make better uses of investment and also have a higher demand for variety, leading to innovation.

It is important to note that Hawkes and Ugur (2012) refer to 'human capital' having an impact on economic growth, not education per se. What contributes to development is not simply the provision of schools, teachers and materials for learners, but effective, quality education (cf. Hanushek and Woessmann, 2008).

Moreover, research indicates that while education and skills development are necessary factors to improve productivity and employment, they are not sufficient (ILO, 2008; Permani, 2009). Other factors found to be critical include:

- Promoting foreign direct investment, foreign technology and pro-employment macro-economic policies
- Maintaining macro-economic stability
- Developing effective regulation
- Adopting a transparent financial system
- Developing effective and respectful governance (Permani, 2009: 16)

Along with:

- Respect for workers' rights, gender equality, and health and safety standards; social dialogue; and fundamental investments in health and physical infrastructure (ILO, 2008: 9)

Such research corroborates the arguments of those promoting the development of demand in labour markets in MENA, discussed above, which identify numerous systemic factors contributing to high levels of unemployment. It also suggests that education policies be embedded in overall development agendas, as suggested in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in order for there to be a significant impact on the economy and human wellbeing.



## 2.2 Evidence from MENA

There is a significant body of research emerging that investigates the relationship between education and economic gain in a growing number of regions and contexts (e.g. South Asia, see Erling, 2014). However, in MENA, there is a relative lack of empirical data available, both in terms of economic and educational outcomes (Badr et al., 2012; ILO, 2012), which makes it difficult to draw evidence-based conclusions about the relationship between the two.

In the following, I will draw together the available evidence in an attempt to create a picture of the current situation.

### 2.2.1 Educational policy in the region

Countries across MENA have made educational initiatives central to their national strategic plans for employability and economic growth. An example of this can be seen in Qatar's 2030 National Vision:

#### Human Development Outcomes

##### An Educated Population

A world-class educational system that equips citizens to achieve their aspirations and to meet the needs of Qatar's society, including:

- Educational curricula and training programmes responding to the current and future needs of the labour market
- High quality educational and training opportunities appropriate to each individual's aspirations and abilities
- Accessible educational programmes for life-long learning

A national network of formal and non-formal educational programmes that equip Qatari children and youth with the skills and motivation to contribute to society, fostering:

- A solid grounding in Qatari moral and ethical values, traditions and cultural heritage
- A strong sense of belonging and citizenship
- Innovation and creativity
- Participation in a wide variety of cultural and sports activities

Well-developed, independent, self-managing and accountable educational institutions operating under centrally determined guidelines

An effective system for funding scientific research shared by the public and private sectors and conducted in co-operation with specialised international organisations and leading international research centres

A significant international role in cultural and intellectual activity and scientific research

Figure 1: Human Development Outcomes from Qatar's 2030 National Vision  
(General Secretariat for Development Planning, 2008: 8)

A further example can be seen in the new education project put forward by the Moroccan government in November 2014 called Vision 2030. The programme aims to:

- Restructure higher education by grouping big universities together into hubs in an effort to increase their visibility across the region and the continent
- Promote university scientific research
- Increase high levels of competence in the Arabic language and instil a working knowledge of foreign languages
- Integrate general education with vocational training by identifying occupations during primary education, establishing a vocational track in secondary school, and moving towards expanded vocational training

These educational reforms highlight the need for promoting quality of education, enhancing teacher education initiatives, strengthening the applied sciences sectors, and encouraging research and development in universities in order to support economic growth and diversification (see also Brock and Levers, 2007). English language teaching is related to all of these developments, as English language skills are important to the development of higher education and scientific research, as well as the formal private sector. Yet for English language teaching to be successful, large numbers of highly skilled teachers are required. All of these efforts require significant investment.

### 2.2.2 Investment in education

Significant levels of investment have been made in education in response to ambitious policy goals in MENA. World Bank data shows that total government expenditure on education in MENA stands at 19 per cent compared to the world average of 14.5 per cent, a North American average of 14.1 per cent and Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development average of 11.6 per cent. Saudi Arabia spends the most on education in the region, both in total and as a proportion of its overall budget expenditure (see Table 3).

Education expenditure as a proportion of GDP and as a percentage of national budgets varies widely across MENA. On average, MENA spends around 4 per cent of GDP on education (see Table 3) in contrast to the OECD average of 6.2 per cent (OECD, 2012), and UNESCO's recommendation that governments spend 6 per cent of GDP on education (UNESCO, 2014).

Country	GDP	Per cent of GDP spent on education	Per cent of total public expenditure spent on education
Algeria	210.2 (2013)	4.3 (2008)	25 (2012)
Bahrain	32.89 (2013)	2.9 (2008)	8.9 (2012)
Egypt	271.97 (2013)	3.8 (2008)	12 (2014)
Iraq	229.33 (2013)	4.1 (1985)	15 (2009)
Jordan	33.68 (2013)	6.4 (2003)	12.7 (2011)
Kuwait	175.83 (2013)	3.8 (2006)	3.7 (2006)
Lebanon	44.35 (2013)	2.6 (2013)	8.4 (2013)
Libya	74.2 (2013)	2.7 (1999) <sup>9</sup>	No data
Morocco	112.6 (2014)	6.6 (2013)	18.3 (2013)
Oman	79.66 (2013)	4.2 (2009)	10.9 (2009)
Palestine	11.26 (2012)	4.9 (2012) <sup>10</sup>	15.7 (2012)
Qatar	203.24 (2013)	2.4 (2008)	2.5 (2008)
Saudi Arabia	748.45 (2013)	5.6 (2012) <sup>11</sup>	25 (2012)
Syria	40.41 (2007)	4.9 (2007)	No data
Tunisia	47.13 (2013)	6.2 (2012)	17.4 (2012)
UAE	402.34 (2013)	1.2 (2009)	25 (2004)
Yemen	35.95 (2013)	5.2 (2008)	16 (2008)

Table 3: Education expenditure in MENA<sup>12</sup>

### 2.2.3 Returns on investment in education in MENA

With regards to evidence about the relationship between education and economic development in MENA, studies have shown that, despite this significant investment in education, economic growth has remained stubbornly slow. Nor have increased investments in education resulted in a notable improvement in learning outcomes according to international assessments.

A World Bank report established that in 2007, given the level of investment in education (an average of 5 per cent of GDP at that time), the learning performance of children was far below expectations. Additional research undertaken since then confirms that no significant improvements have been made (Steer et al., 2014).

<sup>9</sup> World Data Atlas, Libya: <http://knoema.com/atlas/Libya/topics/Education/Expenditures-on-Education/Public-spending-on-education-percent-of-GDP>

<sup>10</sup> Palestine Ministry of Education: [www.mohe.gov.ps/\(A\(AOuLQACy0AEkAAAAAMjYwMDkzMmUtNWlwMy00ZGYzLTk3NDYtODI3NzY1NTY4MTk4Z01vCPH5YzZD\\_-4U912TqvAWD2U1\)S\(230q4555kwxyzjefnqcirqyh\)\)/Uploads/ramamohe/PER%20Education%20Palestine%20-%20Final%20Report%2010%20September%202013.pdf](http://www.mohe.gov.ps/(A(AOuLQACy0AEkAAAAAMjYwMDkzMmUtNWlwMy00ZGYzLTk3NDYtODI3NzY1NTY4MTk4Z01vCPH5YzZD_-4U912TqvAWD2U1)S(230q4555kwxyzjefnqcirqyh))/Uploads/ramamohe/PER%20Education%20Palestine%20-%20Final%20Report%2010%20September%202013.pdf)

<sup>11</sup> Kingdom tops world in education spending (2013): [www.arabnews.com/saudi-arabia/kingdom-tops-world-education-spending](http://www.arabnews.com/saudi-arabia/kingdom-tops-world-education-spending)

<sup>12</sup> Statistics taken from Wikipedia and UIS Data Centre, UNESCO Institute for Statistics, if not otherwise stated.

The percentage of students not meeting basic learning levels in numeracy in the region is greater than the percentage predicted based on their income level. Qatar, for example, has a nearly 50 per cent rate of 8th graders not meeting basic learning levels despite having a GDP per capita that is significantly higher than countries with much higher levels of learning (Steer et al., 2014: 11). Established in 2007 in the World Bank report was the fact that MENA consistently performs worse economically than Latin America and East Asia, regions of similar levels of development that, however, invest less in their education systems, and this has not changed since then.

Also of note is that the relationship between spending on education and learning outcomes is not always direct. While it is true that Kuwait, a high-income country, performs better in international assessments than Yemen, a lower-middle-income country, it is also the case that Jordan and Tunisia, both higher-middle-income countries, perform better than Saudi Arabia, a high-income country with high levels of investment (World Bank, 2007).

In GCC countries, educational spending is high, access is free and students are often subsidised to continue. Despite this, performance is low. This may be linked to a lack of incentive because employment in the public sector is more or less an automatic entitlement, and is based more on citizenship than merit. On the other hand, students in Jordan, Lebanon or Tunisia, where educational outcomes are higher, do not expect employment to follow automatically upon the completion of their studies, and thus may have more intrinsic motivation to learn. Low levels of motivation may also be related to low quality of education and materials, another issue limiting the economic returns on education. However, they may also be related to socio-cultural factors such as religious commitment, kinship allegiances and family responsibilities.

#### **2.2.4 Reasons behind low returns on education**

It is difficult to understand why education has such little impact on economies and individuals' potential for employment. As stated above, it is not due to lack of investment. The following explores some of the potential reasons behind these low returns.

#### 2.2.4.1 Quality of education measures

One key reason why education may not equate with economic gain in MENA is that the education received by the majority does not lead to meaningful learning, and cannot be defined as ‘quality education’<sup>13</sup>. The provision of education is part of any nation’s economic development plan, so any initiative to expand or improve educational agendas is also part of ‘skills development.’ Focus on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and Education for All (EFA) has resulted in numerous programmes being implemented across MENA with the aim of improving access to and the quality of general education (UNESCO, 2013).

However, evidence suggests that education systems at all levels in MENA continue to face challenges in improving the quality of education and guaranteeing the equity of access to education. While these challenges may seem difficult to understand in GCC countries, because of the wealth of resources available, there are also countries in the region where resources are stretched and so struggles to provide quality education are more understandable.

Countries across the region do poorly when compared to international standards, sometimes even ranking among the lowest in the world.

The ‘international standards’ used to make statements about the educational quality in a country are international comparative benchmarking exercises such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS). Four countries in the MENA region participated in PISA in 2012<sup>14</sup>, while 14 countries participated in these exercises in 2007 and 2011<sup>15</sup>.

According to these studies, a significant number of the region’s students fail to meet the test’s lowest performance benchmark, indicating merely basic knowledge of the subject area. In all four MENA countries that participated in this study (i.e. Jordan, Qatar, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates), a large number of the best performers fell below the mean PISA score of all participating countries. Morocco and Tunisia both ranked among the bottom three countries in the TIMSS test for Grade 4 mathematics in 2007, while 53 per cent of Egyptian students did not reach the lowest international benchmark in mathematics and 45 per cent fell below it in science. The results from these studies all indicate that education outcomes are low compared to regions of a similar level of economic development (e.g. Southeast Asia, Latin America).

<sup>13</sup> The vision of ‘quality education’ referred to here is informed by a definition put forward by Unicef (2000), which includes content that is reflected in relevant curricula and materials for the acquisition of basic skills, especially in the areas of literacy, numeracy and skills for life; processes through which trained teachers use child-centred teaching approaches in well-managed classrooms and schools and skilful assessment to facilitate learning and reduce disparities; outcomes that encompass knowledge, skills and attitudes, and are linked to national goals for education and positive participation in society.

<sup>14</sup> Jordan, Qatar, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates participated in 2012. The reason for the decrease in participation between 2007 and 2012 is not known.

<sup>15</sup> Algeria, Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Oman, Palestinian National Authority, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, United Arab Emirates (Dubai) and Yemen.

A recent study conducted by the Brookings Institute corroborates this troubling pattern. Using learning assessments available in 13 MENA countries, Steer et al. (2014) found that 56 per cent of children at the primary level and 48 per cent at the lower secondary level are not meeting minimum requirements in basic literacy and numeracy tests (see Table 4).

#### 2.2.4.2 Relevance of curriculum and teacher supply

It has been recognised that a main contributor to poor performance in MENA's education systems is the curriculum. In many cases, courses have been accused of being outdated and not sufficiently relevant to the labour market.

Countries that score higher in international assessments tend to have curricula which include the promotion of problem-solving and communication skills, rather than the ability to perform routine tasks. Pedagogical methods adopted by higher-scoring countries incorporate inquiry-based learning and adapt teaching to the learning capacity of individual students. In most MENA countries, however, pedagogical traditions are teacher centred, memorisation based and exam focused, with classroom activities involving copying from the blackboard, and little interaction between teachers and students (World Bank, 2007: 8).

Country	Primary		Lower Secondary	
	Numeracy	Literacy	Numeracy	Literacy
Bahrain	33	-	47	-
Jordan	-	-	45	51
Kuwait	70	-	-	-
Lebanon	-	-	27	-
Morocco	74	79	64	-
Oman	54	53	61	-
Palestine	-	-	48	-
Qatar	45	40	46	57
Saudi Arabia	45	35	53	-
Syria	-	-	57	-
Tunisia	65	-	39	49
UAE	36	36	27	36
Yemen	91	-	-	-

Table 4: Percentages of students not meeting basic learning levels (Steer et al., 2014: 8)

Many countries are aware that their programmes and curricula must be redesigned, but face challenges including institutional capacity, lack of employer engagement and insufficient labour market data. Moreover, in the highly centralised contexts of Tunisia and Egypt, institutions do not have the autonomy to revise curricula.

Another issue hindering the educational quality of MENA systems is the low number of teachers available. MENA has the second-largest share of the global teaching gap, after Sub-Saharan Africa. The region needs to create an additional 500,000 posts and replace 1.4 million teachers who are leaving the profession, in order to achieve universal primary education by 2030 (Steer et al., 2014: 19). This means that, in many cases, classrooms are crowded, there are high teacher–student ratios and a large number of unqualified teachers in post.

A final point worth considering in terms of why investment in education has not resulted in MENA countries performing better might relate to the assessment systems in these countries. Much of students' energy goes into doing well in exams. The purpose of these exams, however, is primarily a form of gatekeeping and selection for further study, rather than ensuring that certain knowledge and competencies are learned (cf. Buckner and Hodges, forthcoming).

#### **2.2.4.3 Equity and inclusion**

Along with issues of quality, another factor contributing to the low correlation between education and economic growth in MENA relates to equity of educational opportunity. In fact, issues of equity and quality are strongly related, as the biggest determiner of having experienced quality education and being employed/employable is social class (Valiente, 2014).

Research has shown that countries that have more inclusive education systems tend to do better in terms of the relationship between investment in education and economic development (World Bank, 2007). Inclusion and equity of opportunity, however, is a persistent challenge in MENA. In fact, Morocco's education divide has been called one of the world's widest, and a UNESCO report warned that more private schools could give rise to a permanent two-tiered system (EI, 2014). Even though there has been overall progress made with regard to access to learning (see UNESCO, 2015), this progress is not reaching the most disadvantaged groups. In MENA factors like wealth, gender, ethnicity and location play a significant role in shaping people's opportunities for education, even in high-income countries – and this influence seems to be stronger than in other regions. As reported in the 2012 Gulf Marketing Review, in Egypt, one in five of the poorest does not make it into primary school at all, while upper secondary school enrolment is almost universal among the richest. Gaps between rich and poor tend to widen as children get older, often because youth from poor socio-economic backgrounds drop out due to increasing needs to contribute to household incomes (UNESCO, 2012: 183).

In addition to access being related to socio-economic factors, so is educational attainment. The TIMSS studies demonstrate that family background and community characteristics account for a large share of the inequality of test scores, particularly in Egypt, Lebanon and Tunisia (ILO, 2012: 28). Moreover, the relationship between experience of quality of education and socio-economic factors is becoming more unequal over time (most probably because of the growth of private education, discussed further below) (MEYI, 2009).

One reason why educational opportunities may be less equitable in MENA is that societies are generally quite highly stratified. A recent study by the Brookings Institute shows that wealth is concentrated among a very small privileged minority in many MENA countries (including Lebanon and Egypt), and a few individuals and their families control close to 30 per cent of GDP (Ianchovichina, 2015).

Growth in inequity also stems from the overall increasing preference for private education for those who can afford it, particularly in urban areas. Despite huge increases in public education expenditure, the private education sector continues to grow. In many countries (Bahrain, Jordan, Lebanon), wealthier parents now prefer to enrol their children in private institutions, as they are generally perceived to be of higher quality, with higher efficiency and accountability (although there is limited reliable evidence of this, see WiseEd Review, 2015).

Inequity further relates to gender issues in MENA. Across the region, great strides have been made in increasing the participation of girls in education. Despite this, women face particular challenges in the labour market in MENA, particularly in GCC countries. Their contributions to economic development therefore remain limited. While female HE students outnumber male in Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia and Tunisia, female unemployment rates are higher than average. Labour market participant rates of women are lower than in any other region, reaching barely 25 per cent in North Africa and not even 20 per cent in the Middle East (ILO, 2014: 65). This means that even women with high education attainment are not participating in the labour market, and there is little return on their investment in education in pure economic terms.

Inequity also results from characteristics of the education systems, like lack of flexibility. Countries that provide multiple opportunities for learning tend to perform better in the labour market (World Bank, 2007). In MENA, however, there are few opportunities to transfer from one line of study to another and vocational education in most cases leads to a dead end of low-prestige, low-paid employment. Once a decision is made regarding a field of study, there is no turning back, and there are few opportunities to continue one's studies after a stint in the labour market.

Taken together, this evidence suggests that there is still much work to be done in terms of finding new ways to increase access to education and ensuring that any enhancements in quality reach everyone – instead of having an impact on those who are already most privileged.



#### 2.2.4.4 Language issues

There are also several language issues in education in MENA, which relate both to the quality of education and access. While the MENA region is primarily Arabic-speaking, there are substantial linguistic and cultural differences between the countries, as well as within them. This has a large impact on education systems and learning. Students enter school with diverse language backgrounds. For students from poor areas, classroom instruction may be the first sustained exposure to Modern Standard Arabic, as they might be speakers of colloquial Arabic, or, in North Africa, one of the many Tamazight dialects (HDN, 1998: 12). This difficulty of accessing the curriculum in Modern Standard Arabic might contribute to low student learning outcomes and high drop-out rates, particularly among rural populations. For those who do carry on to secondary education, in some contexts this means a shift to another language as medium of instruction for scientific and technical subjects in higher education. It was often the case, for example in Morocco, Tunisia and Algeria, that scientific subjects were taught in French. In some contexts, English is now being given this role. It is difficult to see how the provision of education in English will be different to that provided in French, which has recently been denounced as:

*Inhibit[ing] learning by filtering it through a language that is generally ill-understood at an academic level; but ... also greatly privileg[ing] the entry of those educated in French – privately, outside the state system – into the most prestigious subjects, institutions and opportunities for study abroad.*  
(King of Morocco, 2013, in Rose, 2014)

The history of language-in-education policy has often been complex and turbulent in North Africa, particularly in Algeria, where the ruling elite has sometimes refused to recognise the country's linguistic pluralism and has forbidden the use of languages other than Arabic as the medium of instruction in schools (Benrabah, 2007: 246), though the situation may now be changing.

Critics of this policy claim that it has produced “cohorts of semi-literate graduates” who have low language proficiency in both Arabic and French and “generations of outcasts unequipped to face the modern economy” (Benrabah, 2007: 245).

While English is now in demand and being privileged, often over French in North Africa, it is hard to see how language education policies for English education or English-medium instruction will be successful when the provision of quality education and language learning has met such limited success in the past. Education policies in the region need to account for the multilingualism in societies and ensure that bridges are built between languages. Local varieties should be valued so that children transition easily into schooling and access the curriculum.

### 2.3 The role of TVET and economic development

The discussion above relates to formal education systems overall. There is also specific discussion about the particular role of vocational education in generating economic growth and enhancing employability. Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) has always had a role in the formal education systems of most countries, including in MENA. Its potential to provide individuals with skills that are more or less directly applicable in the workplace has been recognised (Comyn and Barnaart, 2010). TVET has been deemed particularly important in proving a remedy for youth unemployment. It is also promoted for its potential to promote social inclusion – improving access to education and providing a smooth transition from schooling to the workplace (Nilsson, 2010).

There is still relatively little known about the specific economic returns from TVET, despite its increase in focus. As Nilsson (2010: 252) notes, “Empirical evidence to support the assumptions [about TVET] is not that frequent”. One reason for the dearth in evidence about the effectiveness of TVET is that it is difficult to define and differentiate from other types of education, and therefore also difficult to single out its effects on productivity.

Nilsson (2010) presents an overview of meta-studies on the returns from TVET, both at the level of the company and the individual. From these, he concludes that there is a solid base of evidence confirming the relationship between TVET and the economic gain of individuals and companies.

He also finds that formal schooling provides a major venue for transmitting values, norms and codes of behaviour to young people – which are highly valued by many employers. Thus, regardless of any other return from TVET, given the perceived demand for soft skills in MENA, there appears to be some value in simply being in formal schooling, as employers value (and reward) the values transferred there.

However, evidence of the effect of TVET on overall economic development of a nation and social inclusion is far from conclusive. This mixed result stems from the fact that the causes behind youth unemployment and the subsequent difficulties to reduce it are complex and intertwined. Nilsson thus suggests that while TVET may be part of the solution to increasing economic development, it cannot be all of it.

The TVET ‘toolkit’ for enhancing vocational education usually focuses on governance reforms, qualifications frameworks, quality assurance systems, new funding mechanisms and managed autonomy for public providers (McGrath et al., 2010: 625). This approach, however, has so far had limited impact on generating employment and alleviating poverty (McGrath, 2010). Those already in employment have limited opportunities to take up TVET, those who have not completed secondary education do not tend to qualify for TVET, and those who have finished secondary education tend not to be favourably disposed to TVET because it does not fulfil their needs – they cannot move on from it – because of the low status of the qualifications.

Moreover, despite the fact that governments have invested heavily in these programmes (MEYI, 2009: 6), TVET is usually characterised by its low quality of training, weak linkages between the curriculum and labour markets, a lack of common vision and strategy and a highly complicated administrative structure. While this may have improved slightly since then, evidence from the late 1990s in Egypt shows that the greatest rate of unemployment is found among graduates of vocational schools (Assad, 1997, in Barsoum, 2004).

Rogers (2014) suggests that solutions to issues of low relevance and quality in TVET, as well as claims that it perpetuates inequality, could be achieved by moving the focus from increasing provision of standardised TVET programmes and regulatory systems to encouraging less formal 'skills development' initiatives of the actual and potential workforce, regardless of their previous educational and literacy backgrounds. This, he argues, would provide a firmer foundation for a national policy to remedy the perceived skills deficit (Rogers, 2014: 17).

## 2.4 Conclusion

This section reviewed the evidence that suggests that investments in education should create economic growth. This, however, has not been the trend in MENA, where in some countries very generous investment in education has been made, with little return in terms of generating economic growth or improving the learning outcomes of students.

This research suggests that MENA is not a context in which one can confidently invest in education reform and expect outcomes to be met. Continuing to fund education as it now stands – in the overall system it sits within – is not likely to have a profound impact. The region needs a transformational, systemic agenda that takes into account the obstacles to change in order to ensure that education is reaching the disadvantaged and allowing people to expand their capabilities.

Then people need to be supported to utilise those capabilities in a responsive labour market. This involves focusing on quality and equity in education initiatives, promoting teacher education and development, updating the curriculum in ways that promote leadership, entrepreneurship and innovation, and making sure that skills development initiatives reach those who need it most through a language that they can access.

## SECTION 3:

### The role of English in MENA

Having established that there are many challenges to overcome in the education systems of MENA and that there is a weak relationship between the amount that countries invest in their education systems and economic developments in response to this, this section addresses the question of the role of English language skills in employability in MENA. In order to address this, it is first necessary to provide a general overview of the status of English in the region and its place within education systems, levels of English within societies, and policy developments that have arisen in attempts to increase English language competencies within the region.<sup>16</sup>

This section then turns to the question of whether the increased status of English within these countries is having a positive impact on economic growth and generating employability. It therefore reviews the evidence that relates English language learning to economic gain for nations and individuals, paying heed also to the results that have been found elsewhere. Finally, this section ends by reviewing some of the most recent research into English language learning in the region to call attention to the range of challenges that are faced in implementing quality language education and educational provision through English.

### 3.1 English in MENA's linguistic landscape

Arabic is the official language of all countries in MENA, and is the lingua franca of most of the national populations. In most cases, some form of Arabic can and does serve the communicative needs of MENA populations. In general, Modern Standard Arabic serves as the language of formal communication and schooling, while local varieties are used informally. This means that many children who access learning through Modern Standard Arabic may be relatively unfamiliar with this variety before entering formal education. These local varieties differ from region to region and are not always mutually comprehensible. So speakers of Tunisian Arabic and Saudi Arabic, for example, may not be able to understand each other. This means that there are limits to the potential of Arabic to be the primary language for communication across the region, particularly for those with limited experience of formal schooling in Modern Standard Arabic.

English is prominent across the region in several domains; for example, the business, education, cultural and political sectors, as well as the tourist industry, which constitutes a very large percentage of the Egyptian, Moroccan and Tunisian economies in particular. English seems to be more widely used in urban areas, but continues to grow in popularity across the region. It is purported to be popular among the younger generation, who view English as an essential stepping stone to better career prospects in the private sector.

<sup>16</sup> While there is a vast area of applied linguistic enquiry dedicated to the history and status of English and English language learning in countries around the world (the field of World Englishes, see Seargeant, 2012), comparatively little of this research focuses on MENA countries (but see Hamden and Hatab, 2009; Mahboob and Elyas, 2014; Schaub, 2000). But given that a number of studies investigating the efficacy of English language teaching programmes in MENA have emerged in recent years (e.g. Alhuqbani, 2014; Al-Seghayer, 2014; Bailey and Demerow, 2014; Hassan and Elhami, 2015; Pessoa et al., 2014), this field of enquiry seems to be growing. This is a healthy indication of a growing prominence of MENA scholars participating in global academic debates.

Commentators have remarked on “an almost panicked frenzy for English among Egypt’s future employees” (Schaub, 2000) as well as the growing number of advertisements for job openings that require English in Jordan (Hamdan and Hatab, 2009).

In GCC countries, which have a large number of non-nationals in their populations (see Table 5), English often functions as a *lingua franca*.

Qatar has a population of around 2.2 million people, with Qatari nationals making up less than 15 per cent of the population. The population of Bahrain is made up of more than 50 different nationalities, including speakers of Arabic, Hindi, Urdu, Farsi and Tagalog. This means that English is regularly used among the large community of expatriates, but also as a medium of communication between citizens and non-nationals.

Country	Percentage of population non-nationals
Bahrain	55 (2013, UN)
Kuwait	70 (2014, PACI)
Oman	30 (2013, UN)
Qatar	85 (2014)
Saudi Arabia	30 (2013, UN)
UAE	80–90

Table 5: Percentage of non-nationals in GCC countries<sup>17</sup>

French also plays an important role in the region, primarily in North Africa, but also in Lebanon and with decreasing significance in Egypt. In Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, French is the principal language of business. However, several studies since the mid-1990s have suggested that English is gaining in importance and is also sometimes being privileged over French as the dominant second language taught in schools (Labassi, 2010: 27; Daoud, 2001) – this is strongly driven by the desire/need for access to information from ‘the original source’ rather than through the French translation.

English is growing in popularity among the youth, driven by ongoing urbanisation and perceptions that it improves career prospects. In Algeria, for example, English is regarded as being able to increase opportunities of employment both within the country (e.g. with international oil and gas companies) and outside of it (e.g. in the international environment of the countries of the GCC).

A further driver for English comes from young people hoping to pursue higher education, which is increasingly provided through this medium.

<sup>17</sup> Data compiled from [www.dubaifaqs.com/list-of-gcc-countries.php](http://www.dubaifaqs.com/list-of-gcc-countries.php)

There is also a great interest in studying abroad in English-speaking contexts such as the UK, the US and Canada, with Saudi Arabia among the top ten non-EU countries sending students to the UK (UKCISA, 2015). There are also a number of English-medium offshore campuses of UK, US and Canadian universities in MENA<sup>18</sup>, with Egypt, Oman, Saudi Arabia and the UAE among the top 20 countries with students following UK degree programmes overseas (HESA, 2014). Among students from North Africa in particular, there are high levels of interest in studying in English-medium universities in the GCC countries (Euromonitor, 2012).

English is also desired for allowing increasing exposure to the internet and access to information, though the internet penetration rate in MENA is still relatively low when viewed as a whole (see Gelvanovska et al., 2014). Social media such as Facebook and Twitter are, however, growing in popularity. Research into the role of social media in driving the events of the 2011 'Arab Spring' (e.g. Bruns et al., 2013) has shown the importance of English-language Twitter usage. English is also seen as a language of intercultural communication, and a means to communicate about Islam internationally (cf. Mahboob, 2009).

Finally, English is often used by Western donors and representatives of international NGOs, who have a strong presence in some countries (e.g. Egypt, Iraq, OPT, Yemen) and thus reinforce perceptions of a need for English for employability and development.

### 3.2 English and education

The following section provides an overview of supply of English learning in MENA, and shows how its prominence in school systems across the region has been growing.

English is a compulsory school subject in government schools in every country in the region. In most cases, it is the first foreign language learned. In Algeria, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia, however, English is usually the second foreign language, following French. Even in these countries, English is on the increase. While historically, foreign languages may have been taught from secondary school, the age at which English is being introduced is getting progressively younger, and therefore a growing number of students across the region have English as a subject throughout the majority of their school education.

Given the fact that there is a lack of data available about educational outcomes in MENA in general, it is not surprising that there is minimal evidence about levels of English among teachers and students in government schools, or within societies more broadly. The evidence which exists is not necessarily standardised or reliable; however, it suggests that, despite the strong presence of English in the national curricula of MENA countries, and the number of hours and years that students spend in English language classes, levels of English are quite low.

<sup>18</sup> There are also two French offshore universities in the GCC: Paris-Sorbonne University Abu Dhabi and HEC Paris Education City, Qatar.

For example, the Education First English Proficiency Index (EF EPI), which claims to be the “world’s largest ranking of English skills”, attempts to rank countries by the average level of English skills among adults. The EF EPI was developed by a global language training company, and draws its conclusions from data collected via English tests available for free over the internet<sup>19</sup>.

The most recent EF EPI finds that MENA includes eight of the ten lowest-performing countries in the 2014 index, and is by far the world’s weakest region in English proficiency (EF EPI, 2014: 27). Similarly, results from the GlobalEnglish Business English Index report (2011) revealed that companies in the Middle East have the lowest-ranking average for Business English competency (3.45 out of 10) in the contexts covered. Even in contexts where universities in the region have shifted towards English-medium instruction (e.g. Qatar or the UAE), neither the students nor many instructors appear to be ready for the rigours of academic coursework in English – despite having had many years of schooling (Belhiah and Elhami, 2015: 6). This is not surprising given the persistent educational challenges discussed above, which impact English learning as well.

Various education interventions have been trialled in an attempt to improve teaching quality and learning outcomes for English language teaching across the region.

Such initiatives include starting English language earlier in the curriculum; teaching various subjects in upper secondary schools through the medium of English and using English as the medium of instruction in some higher education institutions; and implementing a student-centred, communicative curriculum for English language teaching. The following sections address each of these responses in turn.

### English in Lebanese schools

As a consequence of the French mandate in Lebanon from 1923 to 1946, French dominated as the main foreign language throughout the 20th century and was used along with Arabic as the medium of instruction. In the past few decades, however, English has become increasingly popular and is now an official alternative to French in the bilingual schooling system (Minkara, 2013). The first foreign language (either French or English) is taught from the level of kindergarten, mathematics and science are also taught through this language from Grade 1, and other subjects are taught through Arabic.

Despite an increase in the popularity of English, the number of schools teaching English as a first foreign language still trails behind the number of schools offering French: only 26.3 per cent of schools offer English as the first foreign language, compared to 50.1 per cent that offer French and 23.6 per cent that offer both.

<sup>19</sup> The EF English Proficiency Index has been criticised for its lack of representative sampling, as participants in the tests are self-selected and must have access to the internet. However, there are few alternative comparisons available of countries by their English skills.

Uptake of private and private subsidised English-language learning has grown in the past decade. In 2000–01, a total of 294,202 students were enrolled in English compared to 428,817 in 2012–13 – which is an increase of 45.8 per cent. Conversely, enrolment in French as a second language decreased by 8.4 per cent over the same period (CERD, 2013).

### 3.2.1 Starting English earlier in the curriculum

One common policy response in the region (and beyond) to low levels of English in society is to start school children learning the language early (see also Graddol, 2010). The trend has increasingly been for countries to start English at a younger age – particularly in those countries where English plays a significant role in higher education. English is now a compulsory subject from Grade 1 for students in Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, OPT and the UAE.

In Saudi Arabia, the grade for students to start English language learning has got progressively lower over time: English was introduced in Grade 7 in 2003; then moved to Grade 5; and then moved to Grade 4 in 2012 (Saudi Arabian Ministry of Education, 2011). Yemen's Ministry of Education plans to teach English language as part of the curriculum from Grade 4 (instead of Grade 7), although political instability increases the difficulty of implementing educational change.

In Algeria, however, English is the second foreign language (after French) and not part of the primary curriculum, and generally students start learning it in Grade 6. The situation is similar in Morocco (though perhaps changing, see vignette below).

Assumptions are often made that, since children learn languages so much more easily than adults, the earlier that they start learning, the better. However, starting children earlier is not always having the intended result, as there is often a shortage of well-trained teachers with sufficient language skills. Language learning for young learners requires appropriate pedagogies and activities that inspire their confidence and creativity, and build on their emerging literacies in their other languages (see Cameron, 2001).

#### A system in flux: English or French as the second official language of Morocco?

Morocco is currently in the midst of deciding whether to keep French as the first foreign language of the country, and the predominant language of instruction in higher education, or to change that language to English.

In late January 2015, a report submitted to King Mohammed VI by the Supreme Council for Education, Training and Scientific Research recommended adopting English as the primary foreign language in the Moroccan curriculum (Arbaoui, 2015).



Further actions which have indicated an increasing shift toward English include the Ministry of National Education and Vocational Training signing in 2014 a partnership agreement with the British Council Morocco to install an English-medium curriculum in three secondary schools. In November 2014, Lahcen Daoudi, Morocco's Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, announced that the government is moving to boost the position of English in Moroccan universities (Allilou, 2014). As of January 2015, science students and selected STEM and health sciences professors are being required to prove proficiency in English before being admitted for study or employment in science universities (ICEF, 2015).

This trend, however, has faced controversy and, until now, the position on English remains undecided. In March 2015 the Supreme Council announced that it was retracting its recommendation to replace French with English (MWN, 2015). The push for French to be kept as the first foreign language of the country is cited as being related to French-Moroccan relations recently being restored after a year-long diplomatic row. The retraction of this policy seems to be unpopular with a large proportion of the population, however, and it is unclear whether previous moves towards English will go ahead.

While the Moroccan government seems to be committed to the idea of teaching foreign languages, it is yet unclear which language(s) will dominate in the education sector. This indecision around language education policy is sure to increase the difficulty of implementing quality-enhancing educational practices across the country.

### 3.2.2 Implementing communicative language teaching (CLT)

In most countries policies have been introduced to promote learner-centred and communicative approaches to English language teaching in the national curriculum. In Egypt, for example, the Ministry of Education introduced in 1999 a new national EFL curriculum based on communicative language teaching. In Jordan, the 1990 curriculum document adopted a communicative approach to language teaching and reformulated the general goals of teaching English. In 2005, a further update of the objectives of English language teaching was introduced. They were expanded to include the following:

1. To acquire the skills necessary for the efficient utilisation of information technology, as well as the linguistic register used.
2. To acquire a positive attitude towards English and realise its importance as a world language and as a means for promoting mutual understanding among people and countries as well as a means for professional development of the individual.

The implementation of such policies, however, has had limited results. In emerging research in this field, reasons for the challenges of implementing these policies have been attributed to outdated curriculum, lack of appropriate teacher education or professional development initiatives, student and teacher beliefs about English language learning and the need to have a shift in assessment policies (see further Section 3.4.1 below).

### The relative success of English language teaching in the UAE

The most recent EF English Proficiency Index (2014) reports that the UAE has had the most success in the MENA region in improving English language learning among its population:

The United Arab Emirates has weak English proficiency compared to countries in other regions, but it stands out in MENA for its relative success in English language education. This success stems from two waves of education reform. In the first wave, the UAE improved training for teachers and administrators as it modernised its curriculum.

The second wave, which began in 2010, is too recent to have had an impact on adult proficiency, but it is already showing results on national tests of children. This second set of reforms has increased the use of English as the language of instruction in some subjects, introduced technology into every classroom and mandated English lessons in all primary schools.

English is mandatory in the UAE for entry to federal universities in all degree courses, as many courses are taught in English. However, due to insufficient training in primary and secondary schools, 30 per cent of federal universities' budgets go to remedial classes, including English classes. It is not uncommon for students to attend these remedial courses for one or two years after graduating from high school before being allowed to start university courses. Clearly, it is inefficient and expensive to force the university system to make up for the shortfalls of the K-12 education system (EF EPI, 2014: 27).

### 3.2.3 English-medium in certain subjects

Other ways in which school policies are attempting to improve English language competence, and make students ready for further training and education in English, is by offering certain subjects through the medium of English. On a small scale, Morocco is piloting an English-option Baccalaureate for STEM subjects in three secondary schools (Arbaoui, 2014). In a much more expansive project in Abu Dhabi, an English-medium curriculum for Science, Mathematics, IT, Health and Physical Education was launched in upper secondary schools in order to better prepare school-goers to achieve the level of English required for success at university (Belhiah and Elhami, 2015). As part of this, over 1,000 new teachers were recruited to enhance the standards of teaching in the UAE, and half of them were from English-speaking countries. Such programmes are having limited impact, although as a result there are now concerns that students do not develop sufficient proficiency in Arabic.

### 3.2.4 Private schools

Private schools across MENA have become increasingly popular in the past decade: 2012–13 statistics show that 8 per cent of all students are in private schools compared to 6 per cent in 2008 (British Council, 2013c). In private education, foreign language instruction is introduced early and throughout the curriculum, with many schools being English-medium, at least in the subjects of mathematics and science. Private schools are widely regarded as having significantly better quality English teaching and resources than public schools, although the quality of education is not necessarily better (see WiseEd, 2015). In the GCC countries, private schools tend to employ expatriate teachers of English, which is a further perceived benefit.

### 3.2.5 Private provision: informal English language learning

Even when the public sector is used for core education provision, there is a trend for parents to invest in private education for their children in order to supplement school learning, particularly in the field of English. In North Africa, particularly Morocco, Egypt and Tunisia, a large proportion of students rely on private tutoring, which is deemed to be 'indispensable for passing exams': 70 per cent of Tunisian secondary students used private tuition, often from the same teacher they have for regular classes (Euromonitor, 2012).

### 3.2.6 Further education (including TVET)

Further education and vocational training in MENA tends on the whole to be offered in Arabic, although this depends on the field of training. For example, Bahrain Training Institute offers a wide range of specialisations, such as Engineering and Business Studies, with English as the medium of instruction (British Council, 2014f). Similarly, the Community College of Qatar initiative, which was designed to prepare students well for entry-level professional positions in their fields, while also equipping them to pursue higher studies, teaches many of its programmes in English (Hamilton, 2012).

#### Bahrain Polytechnic

Bahrain Polytechnic was established in 2008 by the Bahrain Government to address the need for a skilled Bahraini labour force, with the aim of supporting economic growth and diversification.

It serves Bahrain and the wider Gulf region by offering technical and applied professional education, short courses, and applied research and consultancy services whilst adopting the internationally known problem-based learning approach (PBL). On their website, they assure that graduates "will be work-ready; confident and competent, aware of what is expected of them in the professional world, and able to perform to their full potential." Programmes, qualifications and courses, and the underlying methodology of how they are delivered, are developed in consultation with businesses, industries, professions, international education and training institutions.

With English being the medium of instruction, students are required to sit entry examinations in both English and mathematics. Throughout and beyond the study experience Bahrain Polytechnic provides learning support, particularly in the area of writing skills development; as, they note, "both employers and academics place heavy emphasis on English written proficiency." In 2015, Bahrain Polytechnic opened a new Writing and Language Centre, which provides language courses to non-teaching staff at the Polytechnic as well as language services to Bahrain's business sector and the wider community. The Language Centre is licensed by City and Guilds, "the leading skills development organisation, providing services to training providers, employers and trainees across a variety of sectors to meet the needs of today's workplace". ([www.polytechnic.bh/news/bahrain-polytechnic-opens-writing-and-language-centre/](http://www.polytechnic.bh/news/bahrain-polytechnic-opens-writing-and-language-centre/))

Institutions that do not offer their curriculum in English tend to feature English as part of the core curriculum. In Kuwait, for example, each TVET institute provides an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) unit to the curriculum (British Council, 2014e). In Jordan, English is only introduced in some specialties as and when needed, such as the Tourism and Hospitality programme (British Council, 2014c).

In North Africa, English does not tend to be integrated formally into the syllabi of the vocational education sector, although there is growing recognition of the need to do so (British Council, 2014a). In Libya, English is taught in preparatory school and intermediate vocational institutes; however, students do not generally leave these programmes in a position to use English in the workplace (Schellekens, 2013).

### 3.2.7 Higher education

The official language for teaching, instructing and lecturing in higher education in the majority of institutes of higher education in MENA is Arabic, although there are exceptions to this. In each country, there are several areas of study where English is already serving as the medium of instruction (e.g. scientific and medical faculties, engineering and business administration).

English plays a considerable role in university education in Jordan, where it is used as the medium of instruction in some subjects and departments of English and translation have been expanded. Since the late 1990s, all university students, regardless of specialisation, have been required to take courses in English communication skills.

Moreover, most public universities offer MA programmes in English language and literature, translation and linguistics. According to MoE statistics, English Language is the most popular course of study (British Council, 2014c). In Saudi Arabia, where attempts have been made to increase the level of competence in English, almost all the universities and colleges have English departments and English language centres to teach English to the students of all other departments. Arabic is the language of study in public universities in Egypt unless the faculty council decides, in special conditions, to use other languages. English is required of all entrants into higher education institutions in Egypt, but there is a lack of needs assessment and proficiency standards. In many cases, therefore, graduates leave university without communicative proficiency. This is also the case in Libya where studies have reported that low levels of proficiency among graduates are particularly worrying given that the majority of them go on to become teachers of English themselves (Borg, 2014).

### 3.2.8 Private English-medium in HE

The language of instruction in many private institutions, which are growing in number, tends to be English. Private institutions have a better reputation among employers and are believed to produce graduates who are highly skilled and English-proficient and therefore more suitable for the labour market than their publicly-educated peers (Euromonitor, 2012). This is not always the case: most Iraqi companies favour public university graduates, as they are regarded as better qualified than those who are privately educated.

This is particularly true in the healthcare and technology sectors. Such courses are largely restricted to public institutions and admissions procedures for private universities are viewed as being more lenient, raising questions about standards.

### 3.3 The relationship between English and employability

The previous section shows how English is being given increasing prominence in educational curricula across MENA, at all levels. These policy initiatives are being driven by perceptions of English as being particularly important for driving growth and international development and as the language of business globally (cf. British Council, 2013d). There is an assumption in MENA too that stronger English language skills among the population will increase the region's potential for economic development. High levels of English language proficiency in the local workforce are assumed to help attract foreign direct investment (FDI), which is instrumental in improving overall economic conditions and creating employment (Euromonitor, 2012)<sup>20</sup>. English proficiency in a population allows the government to promote the workforce to potential investors as well educated and bilingual, which then encourages them to invest. For individuals, it is assumed that English language skills enhance a person's potential to gain employment as well as their earning power. Until recently, ideas about the value of English language skills have been based on perceptions, but now the field of language economics is starting to explore ways of quantifying that value.

#### 3.3.1 Returns on investment for English language learning

In recent years, along with the academic discipline that attempts to understand returns on investment in education, a field of 'language economics' has emerged, in which research has attempted to quantify the relative value of language skills (see Grin, 2013). Various researchers have attempted to devise means of understanding and calculating the relationship between English language learning, economic gain and employability. These understandings help to estimate the value of various skills in the marketplace, but also help decide how to allocate scarce resources to the best benefit (for example, in education systems). The following interprets the results of some of this work, focusing on that which is most relevant for the MENA context.

A study by Ku and Zussman (2010) explored whether countries that invest in English language teaching in their national curriculum see a return on that investment. To do that, they constructed a dataset based on mean national scores in the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) spanning 30 years in 100 countries in which English is not a first language (including 15 MENA countries). Controlling for other factors influencing trade, they demonstrate that English proficiency in a nation has a strong and statistically significant effect on international trade flows.

<sup>20</sup> Though it is important to keep in mind that the economic sectors in MENA are constrained in generating FDI because they are not employment intensive (see Section 1).

In another study, Lee (2012) uses GDP per capita and TOEFL test scores as measures to explore the relationship between English and economic growth in 43 countries (including four in MENA: Egypt, Jordan, Morocco and Syria). He, however, finds that only in countries in Asia and Europe do higher levels of English proficiency among populations result in positive economic growth. This, he argues, shows that English proficiency is a necessary but not sufficient condition for economic development. He concludes:

*English proficiency will have a positive impact on economic development if the increase in English proficiency is complemented with a minimum threshold of physical capital, technology, political stability, good governance and other factors. The improvement in English proficiency without sufficient accumulation of physical capital, technology and social capital will not add significantly to the economic development of a country. (Lee, 2012: 18)*

This is an important finding to keep in mind in MENA – where there is such an obvious need to reform wider systems: investment in English and skills development alone is not likely to result in economic growth if not accompanied by other measures. Any effort to improve educational quality and English language teaching in MENA should be embedded in a wider programme for economic and social development.

### 3.3.2 Multilingualism and economic growth

In contexts where English is learnt as a second or foreign language, research generally points towards economic benefits of learning English. Its usefulness and relevance are indisputable, but the same is true of skills in any language – all language skills are a profitable investment for individuals (Grin, 2013). Likewise, language skills are profitable for society, and thus the funding of language education seems to be justifiable based on economic evidence as well as for all of the other benefits of language learning (e.g. cognitive advantages, promoting intercultural competence, improving competence in first languages).

While it has been shown that English language skills can enable foreign trade and attract foreign investment, this does not mean that prosperity results from choosing one language over another. Arcand and Grin (2013), in fact, find that multilingualism is very valuable for societies, and it is certainly not the case, as was once thought, that multilingualism acts as a barrier to economic development. Their analysis points to the fact that use of local languages increases income per capita in post-colonial contexts. This may be because much of the economic exchange in informal sectors in these countries requires use of local or regional languages (see Coleman et al., 2013). Or it may be that strong use of local languages in a society increases the likelihood of their use in education, and increases the likelihood that people have literacy skills in them, which in turn has a positive impact on the quality of education (Pinnock, 2009).

### 3.3.3 Evidence from MENA

Although a handful of MENA countries were included in the international studies mentioned above, there seems to be no substantive econometric research into the relationship between English language skills and economic gain in MENA of the kind that has been conducted elsewhere (e.g. in South Asia, see Erling, 2014). An exception to this is the Euromonitor (2012) research.

The Euromonitor study (2012) was conducted in several MENA countries<sup>21</sup> in an attempt to map quantitative evidence in order to demonstrate how promotion of English is an important factor in various developing countries' achieving economic growth. Methods used in this study include a scoring system of quantitative indicators such as percentage of FDI from English-speaking countries, ease of doing business ranking, government expenditure on education, etc. (see Euromonitor, 2012: 12). Interviews were also undertaken with representatives from private companies, the government, educational institutions, etc.

Findings unsurprisingly show that interviewees regard English language skills as an essential part of achieving growth that will give domestic companies a competitive edge in the global economy as well as attract investment from abroad. Convincing evidence is presented to show that there is an increase in jobs advertised online or in newspapers which require English (cf. Hamdan and Hatab, 2009). Percentages are also provided which show salary gaps between English and non-English speakers in various levels and sectors of employment.

As a caveat it should be noted that the study only concerns waged employment in sectors where international communication is prevalent. While the number of people working in these sectors is large in real terms, it only represents a tiny percentage of these countries' populations. This means that these figures may not reflect the impact of English language skills for the general population.

#### 3.3.3.1 English and social status

Research also suggests that there is a strong relationship in MENA between English language skills and social status. Employers often view high levels of English competence as a proxy for status, as those who speak English well tend to be those whose families can afford private language education (Barsoum, 2004). So even for positions in which English is not required, employers prefer candidates with English abilities, as they assume that this means that the employee will be of higher class and therefore is perceived of as a greater asset to the company.

#### The role of English in the employment of female graduates in Egypt

Ghada Barsoum's (2004) ethnographic account of the interplay between family background, schooling and labour market characteristics provides fascinating insight into the complex role that English language skills play in women gaining employment in the private sector in Egypt. This picture helps to explain why, for some individuals, years of schooling do not necessarily lead to economic gain.

<sup>21</sup> Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Lebanon, Egypt, Jordan, Iraq and Yemen.



By undertaking interviews with recruitment agents, Barsoum finds that foreign languages and specifically English are increasingly needed on the job in an economy heading towards privatisation, free market and integration with the global economy. However, linguistic abilities are equally important as a proxy for social background. Even in positions where English proficiency is required, its value transcends its practical use. Due to the low quality of educational provision in government schools, competence in English is heavily contingent on receiving relatively expensive education in private institutions – a privilege of only the elite. As one recruiter notes: *English is essential, even if it is not needed on the job, it is a proof that the candidate is “raki” (refined)*. (Barsoum, 2004: 59)

The type of English coveted by high-end private sector employers are native speaker varieties, which often go together with having the disposition of the elite or are related to looking like a European or an American. As noted by another recruiter: *When I hire: excellent English, presentable, good family background, someone who looks like a foreigner or, better actually, half foreigner*. (Barsoum, 2004: 67)

Therefore, jobs in the private sector are usually off limits to the majority of poor graduates who do not have access to expensive private schooling. Being aware of the importance of English in the job market, these graduates may attempt to improve their language skills by taking one of the many private classes – including those catering to specific needs in various employment sectors (e.g. English for tourism or business).

Such courses may increase students' competence in English. They cannot, however, instil the “ways of being” associated with the elite, which are similarly valorised in the labour market. Regardless of educational background, candidates from poorer families, even university graduates, are not perceived by recruiters as appropriate for jobs in the formal, private sector with relations to global markets. These candidates, regardless of their potential and their ambition, are considered more appropriate for working in shops, as domestic help, or secretarial work in the back office.

They thus only receive jobs in the low-end of the private sector, which often means low pay, long working hours, lack of job stability, no enforcement of labour regulations and no access to social security, paid leave or medical insurance. Many are given tasks much below their level of qualification (e.g. making tea, running errands, cleaning), hardly earn enough even to cover travel expenses to work, and also face the threat of sexual harassment, working in small offices, often as the only woman.

In some cases, for those who can afford it, female graduates may prefer not to pursue employment at all post graduation, preferring instead to stay at home rather than to jeopardise marriage possibilities by working in a low-status, low-pay job.



### 3.3.4 Evidence from elsewhere

While little research into the economic value of English has been conducted so far, the overlying messages of research conducted elsewhere might also be applied to MENA.

These studies find that English language skills are very highly rewarded in the labour market, and the English language skills can greatly improve an individual's earning potential (Aslam et al., 2010; Azam et al., 2010). However, the picture that is found is complex: returns from English language skills are heterogeneous and, like returns from education in general, they increase in line with other socio-economic variables such as gender, ethnicity, class and location. This finding has been substantiated in South Africa, where there was more of an advantage for white South Africans who speak English than for black South Africans (Levinsohn, 2007); in Japan, where women have less access to economic and employment opportunities whatever the level of their English language competence (Kobayashi, 2007); and in India, where returns from English are significantly lower for members of 'the Scheduled Castes' – a designation given to groups of historically disadvantaged people (Azam et al., 2010). Taken together, these findings suggest that without targeting long-embedded inequalities in terms of gender, ethnicity and the rural-urban divide, education in general – and English language education in particular – is not likely to provide disadvantaged individuals with the resources that they need to overcome other socio-economic obstacles.

Research conducted in this area has also shown that the relationship between English language education and economic gain is not static. As more and more people learn English, the demand and value of English language skills is likely to decrease (Graddol, 2010; Grin, 2001). Similarly, as English becomes more dominant in a sector of employment, its value goes down (Grin, 2013). Increasingly higher levels of proficiency may be demanded for higher-level jobs, or other skills or foreign languages besides English are what give people the competitive advantage.

### The returns from quality education

Research into the relationship between English language skills and economic gain also suggests that the strong returns from English language skills that have been found might be reflecting more generic returns from quality education and higher levels of education (Aslam et al., 2010). Several studies seem to be pointing to the fact that low proficiency in English seems to be a sign of an experience of poor educational quality overall. Therefore, one can conclude that topping up people's English skills without overhauling the education system overall is not likely to have the intended effect on educational and economic outcomes.

As noted above, educational provision in local and national languages seems to correlate with quality education and a country's economic development. Dominant roles for local languages in society and educational systems are also integral to successful foreign language learning.

Recent studies have detected a strong correlation between reading ability in the first language and reading abilities in a second language (Dunlea and Dunn, 2013). Successful policies for English language learning can only be built upon stable foundations for literacy learning in the local and national language(s). This is why countries like Jordan and Lebanon, which have higher literacy rates and better educational infrastructures, seem to be better placed for developing English compared to other countries in the region.

### 3.4 English language learning research in MENA

The picture of the potential relationship between English language learning and economic development in MENA can be enhanced by looking into the research currently being conducted into English language programmes in the region. Such research is becoming increasingly prominent in the areas of evaluating English language teaching (ELT) and English for specific purposes (ESP) programmes and in the increasingly popular choice of English-medium instruction (EMI). Taken together, this research highlights the many challenges of implementing quality language education programmes.

#### 3.4.1 Evaluating ELT and ESP programmes

While evidence is thin, an increasing number of studies are emerging about the challenges of implementing effective English language teaching initiatives in MENA. As mentioned above, a large number of university programmes for ELT have developed across the region, which is slowly resulting in a research culture in ELT being established.

Overall, these studies suggest that there are significant barriers to implementing quality ELT, including needs for teacher education so that teachers can enact policy objectives.

Attempting to fill the gap in research in implementing educational change in MENA, a collection compiled by Bailey and Demerow (2014) investigates both the policy and practice of English language teaching in six countries in the region. Further recent work evaluates the impact of implementing a communicative approach in the national curriculum. For example, Bataineh et al. (2011) find a mismatch between Yemeni teachers' theoretical knowledge of CLT and their actual classroom practice.

Similarly, Latif (2012) finds that the newly designed communicative textbook series in Egypt is primarily taught uncommunicatively, and therefore concludes that reforms have not brought on the desired changes in teachers' practices (see also Abdelhafez, 2014). The factors that work as an impediment to changes in practices were identified as the need for teacher training and opportunities for professional development as well as a shift in the assessment system.

Research conducted in Saudi Arabia attributes limited success of ELT to students' beliefs about English learning, an outdated curriculum, limited capacity of teachers and administrative constraints (Al-Seghayer, 2014). All of these factors remain significant challenges for the provision of quality ELT in the region.

There is also a growing body of work that explores effective ways of providing English for specific purposes (ESP) in the region – another significant challenge. For example, Alqurashi (2011; 2014) evaluates an ESP programme for Saudi police and suggests that motivation and effectiveness is low, because the course does teach English for job-related purposes. Bouzidi (2009) evaluates the use of an ESP textbook for English language learners working in the Moroccan hospitality industry, and points to the need to respond to the employment needs of students by supplementing the textbook with local resources. Making English language courses specific to local and profession needs, however, requires expertise and a sustained community of professional teachers and researchers to provide the quality of provision and materials required. Labassi (2010) argues, however, that this community of expertise is missing in the region, despite the fact that significant resource was invested into a large ESP project in Tunisia in the 1970s and 1980s. These studies identify continuing challenges in delivering meaningful and appropriate language skills for employability.

### 3.4.2 EMI research

A further body of research is looking into the challenges of delivering English-medium instruction (EMI) in higher education in MENA, and potential ways to support students to develop the required skills and access the curriculum. The results of the first study to examine the issue of EMI on a large scale in the GCC countries suggests that students struggle to learn the subject matter due to their low proficiency in English (Belhiah and Elhami, 2015).

This study was undertaken at six universities in the UAE and involved a total of 500 students and 100 teachers. Even though most of the students had undertaken an English-medium curriculum for science, IT, health, physical education and mathematics in secondary school, the study found that they were still not prepared for HE in English. As has been found in other contexts (e.g. Lau and Yuen, 2011 in Hong Kong; Byun et al., 2011 in Korea; and Brock-Utne, 2007 in Tanzania), the study suggests that the use of English slows down the learning process; learners are apprehensive about communicating in English; and that teacher quality is lower when teaching through English, as fewer linguistic resources are used.

Students in this study reported that their English had improved because of the policy where they were immersed in an English-speaking environment. Despite this, they had difficulty asking and responding to questions or doing group work in English; it was found that they cannot read fluently and that the use of English results in a lack of motivation, with students being averse to reading the textbooks and writing (in any language but particularly in English). Interestingly, though, some students also report that they also cannot read and write very well in Arabic, which suggests that this may not just be a language issue but a matter of academic readiness – and perhaps also related to the fact that many young people in MENA do not read for pleasure (see Yahoo! Maktoob Research, 2011).

Belhiah and Elhami (2015: 20) thus conclude that the use of English in higher education will not necessarily achieve the intended aim of enabling students to participate successfully in the global economy since *“many of them may not possess a good command of academic literacy in either their first language or English.”*

Similar evidence comes from Pessoa et al. (2014), who conducted a longitudinal study on the transition to academic writing at an English-medium university in Qatar, which has invested greatly in English-medium education through the establishment of Western university campuses. Their research documents the outcomes of this investment in terms of students’ academic development. They find that, even though students have often attended English-medium secondary schools, they had limited experience with reading and writing before university (cf. Yahoo! Maktoob Research, 2011). As a result, their written English lags behind their speaking abilities, even after attending a year-long foundation programme aimed at developing their academic reading and writing skills. This study found that while students were making progress, and the English academic writing programme was making a difference, challenges remain and significant and sustained effort needs to go into supporting students’ transition to university in English.

Given the issues of access in EMI in the Gulf, the studies by Belhiah and Elhami (2015) and Pessoa et al. (2014) propose some potential solutions, which include returning to Arabic-medium education in science and mathematics in secondary schools to give students a stronger academic foundation to build on once they reach higher education.

Returning to Arabic-medium in higher education is a further option, although many believe that this will disadvantage students in the long run in terms of access to employment opportunities and further education. Both studies therefore suggest a need for bilingual education programmes, using Arabic to enhance students’ understanding of course content as well as assure greater mastery of core skills and competencies. This would also involve the provision of bilingual exams and bilingual materials, or at least the provision of glossaries for technical subjects in Arabic. While giving students opportunities to improve their English, this approach would also promote multilingualism and build on literacy in local languages. Such programmes, however, would force universities to reconsider their recruitment trends, which give preference to monolingual native speakers of English, as the research suggests that higher education in GCC countries would be better served hiring competent bilingual educators.

These studies suggest that there are significant challenges to implementing high quality university education in English in GCC countries, which are well resourced and also willing to provide extensive support (e.g. academic writing programmes). Providing higher education through English will create even higher obstacles in poorer areas. However, the conclusions drawn from this research (i.e. that bilingual approaches should be promoted) could be highly relevant in MENA, where even more languages come into play (Modern Standard Arabic, local varieties of Arabic, English, French and Tamazight dialects). In North Africa, there is an even stronger need for serious and evidence-based consideration of language policy in education.

### 3.4.3 Resistance to English and increased concern for Arabic

A further line of research has shown that, due to the increasing interest in and use of English, as well as recognition that learning through English may not benefit its populations, there has been a surge of resistance to English (see Mahboob and Elyas, 2014; Pessoa et al., 2014). Many countries in the GCC are proactively endeavouring to safeguard the Arabic language and culture. In the UAE, the National Strategic Plan for 2016 placed promotion of the Arabic language and Emirati culture at the top of its priorities for social reform. In Saudi Arabia, while there has been an increase in the use of English in the country, there are processes of resistance to English that question its validity as a language that can convey Arab culture and religion (Mahboob and Elyas, 2014). There is considerable opposition to learning English at young ages and concerns that doing so will affect children's ability to acquire full competence in Arabic and that exposure to English will also expose them to unacceptable aspects of another culture. This means that many are ambivalent about English language learning, despite its significance in the curriculum and the investment that has been sunk into it, which of course has an impact in people's success in learning the language. Other parts of the region have seen a shift back to Arabic as a medium of instruction in order to enhance educational quality (see the following info on Qatar).

### Qatar: From Arabic to English and back to Arabic again

In 2004, the Supreme Education Council reform in Qatar specified that the government's newly established independent schools were instructed to teach science and mathematics in English, with Arabic, Islamic studies and social studies taught in Arabic. The goal of this reform was to improve educational quality and prepare students to enter English-medium universities in Qatar and, beyond that, a globalised workforce.

This reform, however, did not have the intended effect. Qatar continued to lag behind in international test scores in both English and Arabic. In 2009, Qatar was the fifth-worst scoring country in the 2009 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) tests. Moreover, the number of students studying mathematics and science at Qatar University was declining year on year. This was attributed to the fact that many teachers had limited English proficiency and were unprepared to teach complicated subjects, or use student-centred active pedagogies, in a language other than Arabic (Paschyn, 2013). Furthermore, there was a fear that Qataris were losing their language and their culture.

In Education City, funded by the Qatar Foundation ([www.qf.org.qa](http://www.qf.org.qa)) and established in 1995, there are six co-educational American universities that teach solely in English (as well as one UK, one French and one Qatari university).

The American universities offer undergraduate programmes to more than 2,000 students from 90 different nationalities. While these universities have successfully graduated more than 1,500 students to date, it is not uncommon to find fourth year students in Education City continuing to struggle with the literacy demands of their discipline, observed particularly in their writing skills (Pessoa et al., 2014). While many students have attended English-medium secondary schools, in many cases their written English lags behind their speaking abilities, even after attending a year-long foundation programme housed in Education City, called the Academic Bridge Programme.

This programme aims to prepare students to apply for the universities in Education City by helping them develop their academic reading and writing English skills, and communication, maths and computer skills, while helping them get used to a co-educational learning environment and learn about college expectations.

As a result, in 2012 a new educational initiative was put forward to return to teaching science and mathematics in Arabic. The change in the teaching language in independent schools coincided with a government ruling that Qatar University should teach predominantly in Arabic.

Now at Qatar University, humanities, social sciences, education and law are taught in Arabic (with some English classes and components), while sciences, engineering, pharmacy and sports sciences are still taught in English. Time will tell whether these shifts, and a consistent educational policy directive, will have the intended positive impact on the quality of Qatari education.

# CONCLUSION

English is playing an ever-more prominent role in the curriculum in MENA education systems, in all countries and at all levels. Despite this, levels of competence in the language seem to be persistently low. Education policies in all countries focus on ways to improve English competence within the school systems, and, when those fail, individuals seem to be increasingly prepared to turn to private education where English language teaching is perceived to be more effective (though these perceptions are unsubstantiated).

The studies documented in this section of the report suggest that there is a relationship between English language skills and economic gain, but the benefits at a national level are limited by the wider system and factors such as macro-economic stability, good governance and transparency. Similarly, a person's social environment and individual circumstances limit the returns from English at an individual level. So without targeting the long-embedded inequalities in terms of gender, ethnicity and the urban-rural divide, education in general – and English language education in particular – is not likely to provide disadvantaged individuals with the resources that they need to catch up.

There is little quantitative evidence from the MENA region that would allow us to make claims such as “an individual who speaks English earns X per cent more than an individual that doesn't” – and this might be the type of evidence that parents and policy makers would most like to see. But even when such claims are made, they are restricted to certain employment sectors and geographic regions and cannot be generalised to whole populations or regions.

Evidence also shows that while English language skills are related to economic opportunities, the same can be said of any language skills. Multilingualism is very valuable for societies, and it is certainly not the case, as was once thought by some, that multilingualism acts as a barrier to economic development. This provides good justification for ensuring that local and national languages maintain a strong role in societies, and that children are offered opportunities to develop a strong foundation of literacy and communication skills in local languages, which will then, in turn, ensure a strong basis for second language learning.

Section 3 ends with a review of the emerging research into ELT and EMI in MENA, which suggests that:

- There are serious challenges in implementing effective English language teaching initiatives in the region. There are also clear needs to develop teachers' competences in student-centred, communicative teaching approaches, as well as abilities to deliver sector-specific, authentic ESP programmes.
- There are severe concerns about the efficacy of English-medium programmes in MENA and the opportunities for students to access learning through English.
- There are concerns among some MENA populations (overall but particularly in the GCC countries) of dominance of global culture over local values, as well as efforts to maintain local values, cultures, religion and languages.

This research therefore implies that offering quality English language teaching is a challenge in the region. Offering education through English as the only medium seems likely to act as a further hindrance to learning.

Despite the significant investment of governments and individuals, even in some of the most generously funded education systems in the world, these challenges remain.

This suggests that there are wider issues at stake, and that there is a need for significant transformation in education systems and traditions. Access to high quality English language teaching should be equitable, and should offer individuals opportunities to enhance their capabilities in ways that allow them to capitalise on economic and social opportunities and to take ownership of English as a medium for the expression of local values. At the moment, there is little evidence that this is happening.



# FINAL CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This report has reviewed a complex array of factors that contribute to the ability of English language skills to have an impact on transforming the economies of MENA and to help individuals gain employment. Section 1 presented an overview of the economic environment and the factors leading to high rates of unemployment in MENA. Unemployment stems from both a need to create a demand for employment and also a need to improve the skills available in the population (i.e. the supply of available resources).

Taking both of these positions into consideration, this report suggests that solutions might be found in a ‘third way’ (cf. Zaalouk, 2014) – a sustainable, systematic approach to transforming economic and education systems to support human development, the creation of decent work and the promotion of learning for livelihoods. In such a context, investments in education in general and English language education in particular would be able to better contribute to human development in MENA. This would also mean that individuals would be better able to use their skills gained through education, training and experience to enhance their own as well as their country’s capabilities.

Section 2 looked into the role of education in economic development globally, and highlights the evidence that is particularly relevant to MENA.

It shows how education policies are being formulated to tackle the economic and social issues in the region and that high levels of investment have been poured into education systems – often without notable impact. Research in this field suggests that investment in education should relate to economic growth. However, when compared to other regions globally, which have invested lower percentages of GDP into their education systems, MENA has experienced limited economic growth and high levels of unemployment persist. This indicates that continuing with such high levels of funding – without a significant change to the system – is not likely to have the desired impact.

Interventions in the education system need to ensure that education is reaching the disadvantaged – not privileging those who are already advantaged – and allowing people to expand their capabilities. This involves:

- Focusing on equity issues (particularly those related to location, gender and language background)
- Ensuring that education is delivered in a medium that students can access, improving the quality of education by promoting teacher education and development at scale and in all regions
- Updating the curriculum to be relevant to the real needs of society
- Making sure that skills development initiatives are relevant and accessible to those who need them most

Section 3 provided an overview of the role and status of English within MENA societies and education systems, and demonstrates the language's increasing prominence at all levels of the education system. It also illustrates that, despite the significant increase in time devoted to English language learning within the region, there has been limited improvement in competence. This is related to the low quality and relevance of education established in Section 2. The section then turned to the evidence that exists about the relationship between English language learning and economic gain for individuals and nations, highlighting findings of particular relevance for MENA.

It demonstrates that there is reason to believe that individuals who learn English are likely to earn more, and countries who have invested significantly in English language education should also experience a benefit of this in their economies. However, at the national level, the results suggest that returns from English can only be capitalised on within well-functioning systems; their impact is limited without sufficient accumulation of physical capital, technology and social capital.

For individuals it has been found that, while English can improve earning power, it does not allow them to overcome obstacles that they face with regard to other factors (e.g. gender, ethnicity, location). Thus returns from English learning are limited by social context.

If there are very few jobs in a region, competence in English may not help a person gain employment; if there is restricted access to the internet in a region, reading skills in English will not help a person gain access to information. If a person's access to employment is limited to certain sectors by their gender, high levels of English will perhaps allow that person to gain the best secretarial job available, but not to move beyond this to a management position.

Moreover, even though a person has access to English language teaching, this does not necessarily mean that they are gaining usable competence in the language. This is why it is so important to situate a discussion about the role of English language skills in employability within a description of the wider social and educational context. If issues of access, quality and the labour market are not given significant attention, English language skills will only increase the growing disparity between the advantaged and the disadvantaged – and will not enable those most in need of development opportunities to enhance their capabilities.

The research reviewed here also reminds us that there are economic returns from all languages, and evidence suggests that it is multilingualism – and not English language skills on their own – that allows societies to prosper. It is therefore important that governments and societies value all of the languages used among their societies, and recognise their potential value for use in education and economic ventures.

In many countries, however, there is a lack of decision about which language policies to promote and policies for English- or French-medium education get introduced and then reversed. There is also a tendency to devalue local varieties and national languages in educational policy and classroom practice.

Finally, this section reviewed the increasing amount of research and evaluation of English language programmes in the region. This research points to reasons for the challenges of implementing quality English language teaching, including outdated curriculum, lack of appropriate teacher education or professional development initiatives, student and teacher beliefs about English language learning and the need to have a shift in assessment policies.

Research into the increasing trend towards EMI suggests that the use of English in higher education introduces a significant obstacle to learning, many learners are apprehensive about communicating in English, and that teacher quality is lower when teaching through English as fewer linguistic resources are used. Policies for EMI are therefore not likely to achieve their intended aims of enabling students to participate successfully in the global economy. Moreover, there are growing concerns that the increasing use of English in education is having a negative impact on local languages and cultures.

However, parents and students are unlikely to return to Arabic-medium policies, as this might then restrict opportunities to participate in global communities. The situation thus seems to call for a 'third way' in language education policy in the region, where bilingual/multilingual policies would make education more accessible to the very diverse MENA populations. This would involve:

- Providing strong foundations in local and national languages that allow people to build on this basis to learn foreign languages
- Offering bilingual exams, materials and instructors
- Developing teacher training and development programmes that encourage the use of different languages to support learning

## RECOMMENDATIONS

With all of this contextual background and evidence in mind, this report makes the following recommendations. There is a need for:

### Economic reform

There is a need for systematic reform of the labour market in MENA. Several approaches have been suggested for doing this (mentioned in Section 1.3.), and it would be of great benefit for them to be implemented, joined up and scaled across the region in order to make significant and sustained impact.

### Educational reform

Education policies in MENA have been proposed in response to the economic issues in the region but they have had limited impact so far in practice. As there has been significant investment in education (particularly in the GCC countries), obstacles to change are not likely to only be related to lack of resources (although this may be true for some contexts, e.g. Yemen).

Suggestions for change are that curricula should be geared to the demands of the labour market. Skills that seem to be in demand are in the areas of science, mathematics, technology, languages and soft skills. Since the labour market changes very quickly, it is difficult to find out precisely what skills are needed and, furthermore, the role of education should go beyond preparing individuals and societies for work. Therefore, education systems should focus on building strong foundations for autonomous and lifelong learning. Some suggestions for doing this are provided below.

### Enhancing quality of education

There are a number of mechanisms that help to support the quality of education that are still in need of development in MENA. These include:

- Implementing in policy and practice learner-centred pedagogies that move away from rote learning and memorisation.
- Providing support for teachers to enact multilingual strategies in the classroom to support students in learning to communicate in local, national and international languages.

- Integrating critical thinking, problem-solving and autonomy skills into the subject curriculum.
- Providing systems for initial teacher education and opportunities for the professional development of practising teachers (harnessing ICTs for the provision of teacher education at scale, see Walsh et al., 2013).
- Implementing national quality assurance standards.
- Reforming assessment systems so that they ensure that certain knowledge and competencies are learned instead of working as gatekeepers (cf. Buckner and Hodges, forthcoming). Since school credentials often do not equate with actual abilities, this will add to the economic value of education. Employers want assurances that the people they employ have the skills that they are looking for.

### Maintaining focus on basic education

Despite pockets of success in education initiatives in the region, there is good reason to maintain a sustained focus on the provision of quality basic education in MENA. This is the most cost-effective way of providing skills education and increasing people's chances of gaining employment.

*Foundational skills are necessary for getting work that pays enough to meet daily needs. They are also a prerequisite for engaging in further education and training and for acquiring transferable skills and technical and vocational skills. For those unable to read basic texts or do basic sums and apply them, the possibility of gainful employment or entrepreneurial activity is greatly reduced. (Steer et al., 2014: 16)*

When focusing on the provision of quality basic education, it is important to recognise that in every country in MENA a bilingual approach to education should be considered. Even when children speak Arabic at home, this variety of Arabic is likely to be quite different to what they experience at school. Thus teachers need to be prepared to use this approach. Bridges need to be built that allow students to move between their local languages and varieties, the national language and international languages. Strong foundations in local language literacy need to be made so that students can successfully learn second languages, which may be necessary in various professions and also further education.

We have seen that increasingly English is being offered as part of basic education across MENA. This means that even those who do not transition to secondary education have some experience of English learning that might be of use. However, when teaching English to young learners it is imperative that appropriate pedagogies are used so that learners can gain confidence and useful communication skills, and that pedagogic approaches do not detract resources away from the local and national languages. This, again, indicates a strong need for teacher education and professional development networks.

Making sure that basic education is relevant to people's lives and potential for employment helps to ensure that more of them will move on to secondary education, and that continuing with education will be viewed as useful to them and their families/communities.

### **Embedding more flexibility into education systems**

More flexibility would give people opportunities to transfer from one line of study to another. There should also be more opportunities to return to education after a stint in the labour market, or while working. The establishment of Open Universities in the region (for example, the Arab Open University, which now also has a branch in Egypt) is a move in this direction.

### **Transforming TVET**

There is thus a need to go beyond this 'toolkit' to consider approaches which provide people with the opportunities for relevant learning and meaningful employment, and which target the people in greatest need of skills development. Rogers (2014: 15) argues instead that the provision of informal vocational training is likely to be the most effective means of getting the most disadvantaged into meaningful work, and presents evidence that this is also the most valued training by employers as well. As entrants into TVET also tend to have limited experience of education in general, TVET needs to reinforce basic literacy and numeracy skills. If part of skills development involves language learning, this literacy and language learning should be embedded within skills training – and not provided as a generic adjunct – in order for it to be meaningful.

### Continuing to reform higher education

Higher education has already undergone significant reform in GCC countries and this has had limited impact so far. Balance is being sought between using the national language (Arabic) or the international language (English) as the medium of instruction. Despite having had years of schooling in English, students tend not to be prepared for higher education through English. Bilingual/multilingual education (including bilingual materials and exams) offers a potential solution for the region, which can also be considered for other contexts in MENA where English is being increasingly used in HE. Languages such as Arabic and French are also likely to have continued importance in certain sectors of higher education too, and should be integrated and harnessed to enhance learning in higher education programmes.

### Improving language education

English has an established position in policy and education systems across MENA, and motivations to learn the language are generally high. There is a need, however, to ensure that quality of provision is high so that the investments that individuals and countries are making in English language education result in valuable gains. Because there is much linguistic diversity, the focus of language teaching in the region should be on moving between languages for national, regional and international communication. At each of these levels, the various languages of the regions have value for gaining access to, communicating and sharing knowledge and developing relationships that are valuable for economic development.

No one language fulfils all of these purposes. English is strongly perceived to be the language of education and economic development, but local languages have important value in building community and for economic exchange in the informal sectors. Arabic has important value in terms of local identity, culture and religion, but also for economic purposes, as it functions as a lingua franca that provides a regional identity as well. French provides people with an additional skill and with links to certain countries and domains. Whatever languages are taught in curricula, for whatever purposes, they need to be taught in a way that focuses on people's communicative needs.

### Filling the data gap with regard to learning outcomes

Finally, it should be noted that in any discussion about the educational context in MENA there are real limitations in making evidence-based recommendations. There is less empirical evidence available about MENA than any other region (Badr et al., 2012: 1). Only a small handful of countries in the region systematically measure literacy and numeracy at both the primary and secondary levels. Iraq and Libya have no recent data available for primary or lower secondary school enrolment. As noted by the ILO (2012: 28):

*Data limitations, in terms of availability and quality, impose a significant constraint on economic analysis and policy design in the MENA region. In addition, the relative absence of statistics makes it difficult to monitor and evaluate policies and programmes.*

There is thus a need for comprehensive learning assessment within the region, including language learning. There is also a need to develop independent education-research institutions. The rise in publications in the last few years exploring the efficacy of ELT initiatives is a healthy sign that institutions are growing their capacity, and this trend will hopefully continue. There is a further need for monitoring and evaluation, for sharing good practice across the region, and for developing means to better use some countries' strengths to solve other's challenges.

With regards to the relationship between English and employability, there is a need for more quantitative data about levels of English in society and needs for English (and other languages) in the labour market, including the informal sector. There is also a need for more qualitative or ethnographic studies, which give insight into what people can actually do with English language skills once obtained, what challenges can be solved and opportunities sought with additional competences in English. Case studies of individuals would help us to better understand what is happening on the ground.

At the moment there are strong perceptions of the value of English, and this value is clearly demonstrated for those working in high-prestige, international companies in the private sector. But these people generally speak English because of their privileged background – and it is that background which helped them to land those high-earning, high-prestige positions.

They have not, in most cases, gained privilege because of their English language learning. Evidence suggests that disadvantages are difficult to escape, and that any individual benefits of English language learning are limited by those disadvantages.

There is some evidence of the transformational power of learning English, but anything that we learn – any subject, any language or any skill – can be transformational. English is not particularly special in this respect. But we know very little about the relationship between English language abilities and employability, and whether efforts to improve people's English abilities will have an impact on the labour market. And we do not know whether, and if so how, individuals' lives can be transformed because of the English language skills they have developed.

We do know that English is not a panacea: English language skills on their own cannot provide people with the routes to employability and out of poverty. Therefore, education initiatives (including those in ELT) need to be embedded within wider programmes for development that take into account the larger structural issues to promote people's opportunities and capabilities.

# BIOGRAPHY

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She has also led two British Council-funded research projects: one on the attitudes to English as a language for international development in rural Bangladesh, and the other on the role of English among migrant workers from Bangladesh working in the Middle East.



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# APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

As some of you may be aware, I have been asked by Eric Lawrie and Philip Powell-Davies to conduct a piece of research about the relationship between English and Employability in the MENA region for the upcoming Symposium in Cairo in 2015. I have spoken to a few of you already, but it's important that I have a bit more information so that I can better understand the position of the British Council in the region and the activity that has already gone on. At a minimum, it is important that I have the country profiles for each of the countries. I would also very much appreciate it if you could answer (at least some of) the following questions (however brief of an answer is valuable). I would also be happy to set up phone calls with you over the next three weeks if more convenient.

1. What are the most relevant and recent educational policy initiatives and interventions regarding employability? Or who can tell me about them?
2. Could you direct me towards the most recent and relevant information and policy (documents) on the country's educational goals, particularly regarding employability and skills?
3. Are there any specific policies and programmes that focus on the role of English language learning in enhancing employability skills in the school/TVET/HE sector?
4. Do you know what existing standards or benchmarks for TVET/trades are used? Do you know if industries are mapping and recruiting based on a standard?
5. What programmes in the region/country are the British Council involved in? Is it involved in any skills development and vocational education initiatives?
6. Could you point me to any notable/successful skills development initiatives in the region (British Council run or otherwise)? What are successful models?
7. To your knowledge, how much work is done at a regional level, e.g. looking to implement economic/educational initiatives? Are successful models trialled in one place being adopted in others?
8. Finally, are you aware of any existing research and evidence on the relationship between English language learning and economic gain or economic gain in your country? (besides the Euromonitor studies)





This report explores the relationship between English language learning and employability in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). It first provides an overview of the economic situation in MENA and approaches to reform that have been proposed to generate growth, which include expanding and improving English language teaching. It then presents an overview of the data that exists on the relationship between economic development and education that is relevant to the region.

From the research reviewed it can be concluded that there is a positive relationship between English language skills and economic gain. However, it must be kept in mind that the benefits at a national level are limited by the wider system and factors such as macro-economic stability, good governance and transparency. Similarly, a person's social environment and individual circumstances limit the returns of English at an individual level. Moreover, research into English language teaching programmes and programmes in higher education that are using English as medium of instruction (EMI) in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) highlight the serious challenges involved in implementing effective English language teaching initiatives. They also uncover clear needs to develop teachers' competences in student-centred, communicative teaching approaches, as well as abilities to deliver sector-specific, authentic ESP programmes. The report concludes by summarising the implications of this review and by proposing recommendations for policy makers and implementers that would help support the transformation of education systems in MENA so that education in general and (English) language learning in particular can better contribute to human development.

Dr Elizabeth J Erling, author of this report, is a Lecturer in English Language Teaching in the Centre for International Development and Teacher Education at the Open University, United Kingdom. Her research focuses on the impact that English language education has on individuals' lives in terms of their identity and social, economic and cultural capital, and she is particularly interested in the relationship between English language skills and economic development in low-income countries.



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